

The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program Turns 20!

A milestone for a unique environmental partnership.

BY RON DODSON

There are benchmarks in everyone's life, where taking the time to reflect on how you arrived at a particular destination helps determine what path you take in the future. As we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, I find myself thinking about the experiences in my life that have contributed to the creation of Audubon International and our approach to environmental education.

Many of our charter members remember the early years of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program and the controversy over our effort to help golf courses participate in an environmentally responsible approach to golf course maintenance. People have asked why, when most traditional environmentalists condemned golf courses, I chose to develop a program that welcomed them with open arms. Perhaps you need to know first that I discovered the game of golf as a teenager. I joined my high school golf team during my junior year and went on to play golf during my undergraduate years at college. And while I loved golf, my academic focus was on biology and the natural environment. What a great combination — playing golf, spending time outside, seeing wildlife. It wasn't until years later that I even began to think about the environmental connection between golf courses and wildlife habitat, much less about how courses were managed and what impact, if any, maintenance practices had on the environment.

Back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, golf courses — at least public ones — were not maintained at all the way many courses are today. Golf courses then were mowed with the old-fashioned reel mowers that were



Golf courses provide a great environmental connection between the course and wildlife habitat. Proper management practices can protect environmental concerns while producing quality playing conditions.

pulled behind a tractor. In many places during the summertime, the fairways would turn brown or die altogether, and that was just part of the game. I've even commented to other golfers in the past few years that many of the fairways that I now play on are in better shape than the greens that I used to putt on when I was a kid. As a matter of fact, when I first learned how to play golf, the greens were not grass at all, but sand! But the changes in the golf course landscape took place slowly and subtly over the years, and it wasn't until the mid-1980s that I took a closer look at the nature of golf courses.

In 1987, when I was reorganizing the Audubon Society of New York State (ASNY) and looking for new ways to promote conservation and new people to work with, my father suggested that I should develop some sort of a program for golf courses. It seemed to

him that most golf courses were comprised of at least a few hundred acres of land, and most of them had water, providing habitat for a variety of species. Not only that, but there were a lot of people who played the game and would serve as a perfect audience for an environmental education program. That was actually the seed that grew into the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses.

A few years later, I was contacted by McGregor Links Golf Club in upstate New York. The superintendent was concerned about skunks on the golf course and wanted some wildlife advice that would help him solve the problem without using chemicals. This gave me a chance to spend some time on a golf course, not from a golfing point of view, but from the perspective of a golf course superintendent. I asked a lot of questions and we talked about the basic principles of wildlife

management. I told the superintendent that these principles applied to all wildlife and that they could be applied on a golf course the same way that they could be applied on a wildlife refuge. During the next several months, I was invited to a number of other golf courses where superintendents were looking for similar advice.

Also at this time, a person working for an upstate New York consulting firm happened on an outdoor sporting store in Keene, New York, and asked to use their fax machine. The manager of the store was a board member of ASNY and happened to notice that the fax had to do with a golf course development project. He struck up a conversation and suggested that the consultant contact me because I was in the process of developing an environmental program for golf course superintendents.

He contacted me and asked if I would be interested in visiting the Lake Placid Club, which was considering redevelopment and included a golf course. With architect drawings in hand, I walked the property. I remember wondering if the architect had actually been to the site to do the drawings, because a couple of proposed greens were in wetlands and one fairway was much too close to a river that was in the state wild, scenic, and recreational river system. I wrote up a report and sent it to my contact with the company. I told them, among other things, that I didn't see how the proposal would ever make it past the Adirondack Park Agency as it was currently laid out. After some follow-up meetings, the developer decided to move forward with the original proposal, and, as predicted, was eventually forced to abandon the project.

During a few of the meetings that I attended in connection to the Lake Placid Club, I also met Jim Snow, who was, at the time, the regional agronomist for the United States Golf Association (USGA). He was intrigued that an environmental organization like ASNY was actually willing to work with golf courses. While we talked a few times about the concept of a program for golf courses, it never went past the discussion stage.

After those preliminary conversations, I received a mailing at my home from the USGA. It was a typical bulk mailing asking me to become a member. I read through the materials and decided to write to the USGA, describing our organization and our interest in working with golf courses, and that the USGA would make a perfect partner in supporting this effort. About a month later, I received a letter from the USGA inviting me to participate in an educational session of the USGA during the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America conference in Orlando.

During my presentation, I pointed out that golf courses would remain under attack for their lack of awareness and attention to environmental issues until someone in the golf course industry took the lead. Negative media attention and criticism from environmentalists would continue until golf courses changed their management practices to reflect a greater sensitivity to environmental concerns. I publicly unveiled our interest in working cooperatively with golf courses to increase their awareness of environmental issues and to help educate them in ways that would benefit both their golf course and the environment.

Jim Snow had recently been promoted to National Director of the USGA Green Section, and after my presentation at the GCSAA conference, we talked again. He thought the USGA might be interested in supporting the program for golf courses. We had more meetings, and finally Jim approached the USGA Executive Committee and asked them for a grant of \$35,000 to promote an environmental program for golf courses. The grant would underwrite my time to travel across the country and speak at various functions, including numerous regional USGA conferences. At first, the response from the Executive Committee was not very favorable. They were concerned about the USGA getting too involved in environmental issues and forming too close an alliance with an environmental group. However, one member of the Executive Committee strongly supported not only what we were trying to do, but encouraged the USGA to work with ASNY. This

Executive Committee member was the same vice president of the company that proposed the redevelopment of the Lake Placid Club. He knew firsthand that I had given them sound advice even though they chose not to take it. With his support, the funding was approved.

Our goal that first year was to see if we could get 100 golf courses to join the program. After a lot of miles and a lot of meetings, we ended 1990 with 150 courses enrolled in the program. Having met our goal, Jim asked me what I thought we needed to keep the program going, and it was clear that what I needed most were people to run the program while I was in the field promoting it. I asked the USGA to contribute \$100,000 and become a sponsor of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses. They agreed to give us \$100,000 a year for three years to get the program going. Those three years have come and gone, and, to their credit, the USGA is still sponsoring the golf program, which has steadily grown along with our other programs.

We are proud of our accomplishments over the last 20 years. We have an exceptional staff that is dedicated to environmental education and takes great satisfaction in working to help people help the environment where they live, work, and play. The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program is thriving because people are concerned about the environment and because they sincerely want to improve the environment, not just for themselves, but for future generations. All of Audubon International's programs are founded on a partnership approach — a willingness to work together toward common goals — and all of our successes are our members' successes. Congratulations to you for all your good work!

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