

Greening the Game

The business value of environmental stewardship.

BY KEVIN A. FLETCHER, PH.D., AND JOSHUA CONWAY

No matter where you turn, new economic realities are re-shaping the ways businesses operate.

Yet, even as we manage our way through this significant economic downturn, a broader interest in protecting the natural environment has remained a lead news item. As a result, businesses today are thinking differently about the environment and are making environmental stewardship a part of their core business strategy. This is also the case for golf course operations, and many are doing so through the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses (ACSP).

The ACSP, started by Audubon International 20 years ago with support from the United States Golf Association, is based on the simple concept that effective planning leads to positive actions and ultimately is good business. Often, these opportunities for marrying good environmental action with business value are relatively simple and build on the strengths of a golf facility. For instance, golf courses working through the ACSP have been able to convert an average of 22 acres of land from heavily managed turfgrass to less-managed natural areas for wildlife. This, in turn, has led to reduced water, chemical, fuel, and labor resources, without compromising quality of play. That is money saved.

In 2004, Audubon International initiated a set of research projects designed to uncover the business value of environmental stewardship. The first "Business Value Survey" revealed that golf courses were, in fact, experiencing business value from their voluntary environmental actions, but most did not know how to track this information. Follow-up research included data mining ACSP member files in a search for case studies and examples of voluntary environmental actions and projects — and their business/financial costs and benefits.



North Shore Country Club (Glenview, Illinois) has been a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary since 1998.

Out of 319 environmental projects submitted to Audubon International, 55% were identified by the members to have led to cost savings. Further evaluation by Audubon International program staff of each of the 109 projects identified as having "no business value" revealed that 58% of the projects did in fact have a high likelihood for reducing cost, while an additional 29% had some likelihood for reducing cost. Moreover, all of the 109 projects analyzed had the potential to enhance the image and reputation of the golf course, an often overlooked benefit.

This past year, Audubon International once again sent surveys to the 2,200-plus members of the ACSP, with a response rate of more than 25%. Some of the results include the following:

- **Saving Money:** 70% of respondents had reduced pesticide costs through the ACSP.
- **Reducing Risk:** 90% of respondents mitigated risks through the program as a result of improved management practices.
- **Attracting Customers:** 15% of respondents reported new golfers/members as a result of involvement made through the ACSP.
- **Using Water Wisely:** 50% of respondents have reduced the amount of acreage they irrigate as a result of ACSP participation.

- **Gaining Business Value:** 60% of respondents reported saving money and enhancing their image and reputation as a result of working with Audubon International.

In an era of sustained interest in protecting the natural environment within the context of a new set of economic realities for everyone, golf course operations can be pleased to know that the types of voluntary actions taken through the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses also serve to meet the demands of tightening budgets. Costs avoided due to these types of action can instead free resources to be used to address quality of play, to help better market the course, or enhance the overall experience for the golfers in some other way.

Environmental stewardship, that leads to business value while also positioning golf to be a good neighbor in the community — that surely is the definition of a more sustainable golf facility. To read Audubon International's complete report, *Golf's Green Bottom Line*, visit <http://auduboninternational.org/downloads.html>.

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