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Special Report: **Golf**

Golf courses bow to environmental pressure

Accreditation schemes seek to prove developments' sustainability credentials as tourism grows



MAY 24, 2013 by: Sam Judah

Few sports raise the hackles of environmentalists in the way that golf does. Often regarded as the preserve of the wealthy, its landscaped swaths of bright green grass are regarded as impositions on the natural order, kept pristine by pesticides and lashings of fertiliser.

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New courses have cropped up in rainforests and even deserts, as developers jostle to attract well-heeled holidaymakers happy to pay the healthy green fees.

Just as environmental awareness has grown in recent decades, so too has pressure on the sport to answer its critics. Golf courses often advertise their environmental credentials, and new schemes have emerged to help verify and promote those claims. Some are controversial and accusations of "greenwashing" abound.

Peter Walton, chief executive of the International Association of Golf Tour Operators, says tourist boards across the world are trying to attract golfers because they spend an average of 120 per cent more than other tourists per person per day – largely because golf is an expensive pastime. The industry is booming, too. Association members reported sales growth of 9.3 per cent worldwide in 2012, and the organisation estimates the total market to be worth about £9.6bn.

Walton does not think such figures will inevitably lead to greater environmental impact. "The objective of sustainability is a true one. In the last 15 years or so, no course has been built without going through an environmental impact assessment," he says.

This year the association launched a formal partnership with the Golf Environment Organisation, a high-profile certification scheme backed by the R&A, golf's governing body. It relies on funding from bodies such as the R&A and the European Tour and revenue from clubs that pay to join its programmes.

"We wanted to offer an eco label for golf," says Jonathan Smith, GEO's chief executive. "Like forestry, fisheries and farming, the idea came from the desire of the industry to set some minimum standards." GEO offers a stamp of approval to new and existing courses that pass an inspection and meet its standards in areas such as waste, energy, water use, pollution and impact on the natural environment.

Other certification schemes exist. The Sustainable Golf Project, for example, is a profitmaking business that provides a set of environmental benchmarks to golf courses. Golf clubs assess themselves and become "clan members" if they believe they have met the criteria.

The Moon Palace golf resort in Cancún, Mexico, has been awarded the GEO certificate. Its development was overseen by Fernando Calderon, its environmental assessor.

"In the 1960s and 1970s many courses were built in Mexico that damaged the environment," he says. Imported grass carried a disease that affected the indigenous palm trees, and a spate of similar problems led the Mexican government to place stricter controls on new developments.

Calderon says the course was designed to weave its way around the native mangrove trees, allowing lizards and eagles that inhabit the area to remain.

However, in some parts of the world there is little environmental legislation and the fate of the land lies in the hands of the developers.



Impact: Guana Cay is home to sensitive coral reefs

On Great Guana Cay, a tiny island in the northeast Bahamas, a community group has been in disagreement with the Discovery Land Company, a developer that has built a string of luxury homes around the Baker's Bay golf course and marina.

The Save Guana Cay Reef group believes fertiliser from the development has leaked into the ocean, damaging the sensitive coral reef that lies 30m offshore. "It's the most beautiful and most intact reef in the Bahamas," says Thomas Goreau, president of the Global Coral Reef Alliance, an environmental organisation.

He has led a team of unpaid scientists to investigate any impact of the course on the reef. They are concerned that fertiliser may be escaping and causing rapid growth of algae that smothers the delicate coral.

"It's like adding Miracle-Gro to the reef," says James M. Cervino, a scientist who usually carries out environmental assessments in New York.

The developers deny the claims. Livingston Marshall, senior vice-president for environmental and community at the Baker's Bay club, talks of "a small group of individuals who are resistant to change". He thinks algae growth could have been caused by a number of factors, such as tropical storms, and points out that the Bahamas government has approved all of the company's plans.

Despite such controversies, golf is not always regarded as environmentally questionable. Some observers argue that it is possible for courses to have a positive impact on their surroundings. Grahame Madge of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds says that in the UK in particular "the woodland dotted around courses provides refuge for local wildlife". Where effective legislation is in place, and courses are designed to be congruous with their environment, improvements can be made.

Ideally, networks of enlightened developers, government officials and local communities would work together to reap the economic benefits of golf tourism without disrupting the ecosystems that the courses inhabit. Calderon puts it much more simply: "It's not a good idea to kill the planet and get rich. My plan is to save the planet – and still get rich."

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