

A challenge to Asian golf course operators to generate significant benefits by doing the

"right thing"
by Paul Spencer Sochaczewski



In 2006 American real estate mogul Donald Trump bought a 1,400 acre plot in Scotland and announced plans to construct "the world's best golf course" on a remote and beautiful stretch of coastline that is home to some of Britain's rarest birds.

His ambitious plans called for a \$2.1 billion golf resort with two 18-hole courses, a luxurious hotel and some 1,500 vacation homes and villas.

Two years later, his course remains unbuilt, tied up in legal wrangles and heated debates that pit the Trump-led forces that promote development versus an equally vociferous group that argues that the Trump complex would damage not only the environment but the area's beauty and quiet atmosphere.

I suggest there are two lessons herein for Asian golf developers

- The first is that, in Scotland at least, money cannot buy success.
- The second is that people -- and I'm lumping together local governments, golfers, media and citizens -- expect

new golf developments to be socially and environmentally responsible. No green, no deal.

For some people golf is a symbol of everything evil - it's blamed for all sorts of environmental and social ills.

But perhaps this perception is just that - a perception that golf, because it is mostly played by the elite, is de facto "bad".

Certainly, there are many examples where golf course developers have ignored environmental and social laws and ethics, and I do not want to minimize those cases.

But an increasing number of golf course developers and operators want to be good citizens.

I created IGOLF-International Golf and Life Foundation with some like-minded colleagues from the world of conservation, law, media and development to help golf course owners and managers do the right thing.

Our new (we just started a few months

ago) Swiss-based foundation is a non-governmental, non-profit group. Although we work worldwide, one of our key focal regions is Asia, partly because the need is here, but more importantly because there are many golf course managers in Asia who want to improve their operating policies, which gives us a fertile ground for successful partnerships.

What kind of problems are we confronting?

On the environmental side, Asian conservationists have protested against golf course developments in protected areas, not to mention courses that take up forest land, destroy natural landscapes, cause erosion, disrupt drainage patterns, consume and pollute scarce water supplies and kill wildlife through excessive chemical use.

In one example, a group of developers wanted to build a course on a Malaysian island rich with magnificent coral reefs, mangroves and marine life. Experts who reviewed the approved phase-one environmental impact assessment for a golf course on the island say that it ignored several crucial aspects, including erosion

rates and the socioeconomic impact (not to mention the paradoxical fact that the Malaysian government paid more than \$7.5 million for a pipeline to feed water from the mainland to the island golf course, where a cholera epidemic had already broke out because of an inadequate supply of clean water. And in Thailand, golf course developers at one site ignored eco-protests by constructing a course inside one of the country's leading national parks.

On the social side, some golf courses developers in Asia have acquired land from villagers either by force or coercion, sometimes without paying adequate compensation. Some operators do not pay adequate wages, or refuse to provide socially-responsible training schemes and community development projects.

For example, media reported that in West Java a golf course development was hindered by protestors who complained that developers displaced 287 farmers, paying them 1.5 U.S. cents per square meter of land that was taken. There are reports of

Vietnamese and Chinese courses blatantly expropriating land from farmers.

Why does this matter?

The primary reason is simply because doing the right thing is the right thing to do. Every educated person in Asia today knows what is good, and what is not so good. Greed and convenience should not impede the moral imperative.

Another reason is that it is good business.

Let me explain.

First, virtually all countries have good environmental laws. Granted, not all of the countries in Asia implement and enforce the laws, but the laws exist. By not respecting conservation imperatives, a golf course is breaking the law.

Second, being a good citizen will enhance relations with local governments and local communities.

Third, golfers demand good behavior. Golfers, whether they are members or daily-fee players, not only want a well-manicured course, they also want a healthy course, with lots of animals, birds and plants. Most golfers spend most of their lives in offices in grey polluted cities, and look forward to a round of golf "in the country". And, as awareness grows, golfers increasingly do not want "their" course to kill nature or abuse communities.

Fourth, many studies show that by doing good - reducing energy use, lowering consumption of chemicals, constructing self-replenishing reservoirs and using grey water from nearby hotels and housing - a golf course can reduce operating costs.

Fifth, good behavior will lead to a healthier, happier work force.

Sixth, right practice gives a course a strong media hook. Media love "good news" stories about bird censuses, ecological study

About
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Paul's international career in conservation, NGO development and public awareness began when he entered the United States Peace Corps in 1969 and was assigned to Sarawak, a Malaysian state on the island of Borneo. He has managed advertising agencies in Asia, and subsequently developed global public awareness campaigns for WWF-World Wide Fund for Nature and IOF-

International Osteoporosis Foundation. He is an award-winning journalist, having written several books and more than 600 by-lined articles in International Herald Tribune, Wall Street Journal, Travel and Leisure Golf, Earth Times and CNN Traveller. He has lived and worked in more than 60 countries and currently lives in Bangkok.

