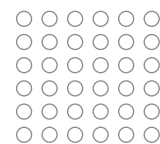


THE FUTURE OF GOLF: HOW GREEN ARE YOUR GREENS?



Tanah Merah Country Club



Take the complicated issue of agro-chemicals. Most Asian golfers want healthy fairways, lush grass and true greens. The Scottish-links approach to golf course maintenance would face a tough audience if a club owner tried to offer such a rustic-appearing layout to a picky Asian golfer. He wants his caddies cute and his grass green.

Golfers well know that there are two types of people in the world - folks who love the game and people who think it's a silly, elitist pastime for overweight men having a bad fashion day.

Actually, we might add a third category. People who don't know much about golf, but who are convinced it is bad - bad for the environment, unfair to local communities, disrespectful of local history and culture.

Such perceptions are hard to deal with. Like religious or political beliefs, these anti-golf sentiments tend to linger, oblivious to facts. It's sort of like trying to wash the smell of durian off your fingers - soap should do the trick, but curiously, it doesn't.

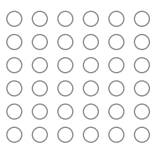
Are such "golf is bad for nature" beliefs valid?

Like so many preconceptions, the answer is a definite maybe..., not really..., since it all depends....

It's important to address the questions, since golf is booming in Asia -- there are an estimated 18 million golfers in Asia playing on 3,700 18-hole courses (more than a quarter of them built since 1990) according to the R&A, a St. Andrews, Scotland-based organization that serves as the game's rules and development body. With many more courses under development throughout Asia (Vietnam, for example, has 17 courses, with some 30 new courses under construction and another 50 planned) the question of whether golf can be good for the environment takes on greater importance.

To complicate matters I have a feeling that the eco-golf debate is fueled partly by the (sometimes accurate) perception that golf in Asia is elitist, making it easy to link the sport with many of our modern problems.

In late 2007 I created, with several colleagues, IGOLF-International Golf and Life Foundation, a not-for-profit organization based in Switzerland which promotes environmental and social responsibility in golf. Although we work globally, one of our focuses is on Southeast Asia, and we plan to run technical training seminars for course operators and to recognize courses which



Pacific Dunes Golf Club

adhere to our eight guidelines for responsible behavior. To my knowledge IGOLF is the only NGO which combines environmental and social responsibility.

In this column my colleagues at IGOLF and I hope to examine some of the anti-golf sentiments and show how some golf courses have taken positive steps to become good environmental and community citizens.

It is our contention that a properly-designed and thoughtfully-managed golf course can actually be good for both people and nature.

What are some of the key issues? For now, let's focus just on the environmental issues.

Take the complicated issue of agro-chemicals. Most Asian golfers want healthy fairways, lush grass and true greens. The Scottish-links approach to golf course maintenance would face a tough audience if a club owner tried offer such a rustic-appearing layout to a picky Asian golfer. He wants his caddies cute and his grass green.

But a course operator needs to use some chemicals to serve as fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides and fungicides. But how much is enough? And what kind? Can course owners find organic, or even non-chemical solutions? And how does the chemical footprint of a golf course compare to that of agriculture?

Another challenge is water use. It's been said that a golf course in southern Spain, a notoriously arid and over-built region, uses as much water as a town of 12,000 people does

in one year. This is clearly unacceptable. The problem is more seasonal in Asia, where some courses are built on areas which are seasonally wet and seasonally dry. Can courses use drought-resistant grasses? Build reservoirs? Improve irrigation techniques? Use native vegetation that withstands hot sun?

And then there's habitat destruction. Some Asian courses have encroached on protected natural areas. But other courses, notably in Phuket, have been constructed out of wastelands, such as abandoned tin mines. Courses often provide valuable habitat for plants and animals, sometimes improving the habitat significantly.

We don't plan to become an apologist for bad golf practices. But in this column I do hope to show that the problems can be resolved by well-intentioned course owners who make sensible decisions.

Why should they take such actions?

First, it's the law. All Asian countries have regulations concerning land use. Even if such regulations are rarely enforced, the laws are there, which provides a useful template.

Second, it's good for business. Environmentally-responsible behavior - less chemicals, recycling water, energy efficiency - can save the course significant amounts of money.

Third, golfers appreciate that their course is "doing good".

And finally, in a world with few absolutes, green golf, which is also socially-responsible (a subject for a future column), is the right thing to do.