

# The nature of golf

Asia's courses get greener



Golfers make themselves a bit neurotic with “swing thoughts”—concerns about stance, grip and a thousand other things that sneak in during what should be a moment of clarity as they begin to swing the club.

Here's one more nagging question that sneaks in on me: Am I doing the “right thing” from an environmental perspective? Golf and nature conservation are two passions of mine, and I worry: Can they be reconciled?

## Golf Journal

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Golf courses world-wide have become a target of environmental scorn, for bulldozing ecologically sensitive areas, using too much scarce water and applying too many dangerous chemicals. Chee Yoke Ling, environment coordinator of the Third World Network, a watchdog group for the developing world, writes in the organization's magazine that golf development “is becoming one of the most unsustainable and damaging activities to people and the environment.”

The battle to stop golf has spawned groups with impressive names—the Global Anti-Golf Movement, the Global Network for Anti-Golf Course Action, both with roots in Japan—as well as a World No-Golf Day (this year it was May 2).

These campaigners are up against a golf boom in Asia. Of an estimated 4,000 18-hole courses in the region, excluding Australasia—more than on continental Europe—300 have opened in the past five years, according to Golf Research Group. With many more courses in development (in Vietnam, for instance, home to 17 courses now, some 30 more are under construction and another 50 planned), the question of whether golf inevitably harms the environment is hard for conscientious golfers to ignore.

Vigorous golf defenders have stepped up. Australian golfer Greg Norman, who has his own course-design business, has said golf courses can “provide green spaces, filter air, purify water and create wildlife habitat.” Ronald Fream, whose design firm Golfplan—Fream, Dale & Ramsey has worked in Asia for more than 30 years, argues that a golf course can reclaim wasteland—such as a former garbage dump or mining pit—and help control erosion. With its turf and trees, Mr. Fream adds, a golf course also produces oxygen and fights global warming by absorbing carbon dioxide: “On occasion we plant 2,000 or 3,000 trees around 18 holes,” he says.

### Keeping it green

These five Asian courses illustrate different elements of good practice.

#### SINGAPORE ISLAND COUNTRY CLUB, SINGAPORE

Playing here, I feel as though I'm on a nature reserve. The four courses are shaded by mature trees, tropical birds are numerous and it isn't uncommon to see monkeys. Nongolfers have partial access through public-access footpaths.

One reason for the biodiversity is that the courses lie next to two of Singapore's 14 reservoirs, and the land on which they're built is owned by the Singapore Public Utilities Board. That means they must “comply with our stringent pollution-control requirements and adopt good water-conservation practices,” explains Tan Nguan Sen, director of the agency's Catchment and Waterways Department.

#### PHOKEETHRA COUNTRY CLUB, SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA

In a region subject to seasonal droughts, Thai golf-course designer Major General Weerayudth Phetbuasak sought to provide adequate water without harming the ecosystem or jeopardizing local farmers' supply. The solution: 19 man-made lakes that collect rainwater for irrigation, and a system to pump it through all the water hazards. According to Didier Lamoot, general manager of the golf course, this system eliminates the need to drill wells. It may even provide a surplus that could be distributed to local communities.

#### LAGUNA PHUKET GOLF CLUB, PHUKET, THAILAND

Like most of the golf courses on Phuket, Laguna Country Club, opened in 1992, was built on an abandoned tin mine, an example of “restoration ecology” in which a wasteland is turned into a productive and attractive resource. An “environmental area” serves as a de facto nature reserve. The course is irrigated with “gray water”—nontoxic waste water—from surrounding hotels and is planted with native grasses that reduce the need for fertilizers and herbicides, according to Tim Haddon, Laguna's director of golf.

#### HORNBILL GOLF AND JUNGLE CLUB, SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

Malaysian property developer Lee Kim Yew, in a venture with a Sarawak state agency, built this resort with an eye to rehabilitating 2,000 hectares of partially logged mountain top. With rainfall at 7,000 millimeters a year, some fungicide is used on the greens, but when I visited the greenskeeper told me all fertilizer is organic and that insect control on the course is provided by chickens.

On one hole I heard the unmistakable whoosh-whoosh of rhinoceros hornbills, or kenyalangs, in flight. To ecologists this bird, important for many Borneo tribes, signifies a healthy forest. “We used golf to repair nature,” Mr. Lee says.

#### NEW KUTA GOLF CLUB, BALI, INDONESIA

Built in one of the most arid and infertile regions in Bali (a desalination plant will provide water, with the excess given to the local community), this site faced several environmental challenges, says its designer, Ronald Fream. “We adapted to saline and thin soils,” he says. “We planted limited golf turf. We protected and preserved the adjacent natural, almost desert-like vegetation. Where possible we are planting with native trees...with a ‘semi-Scottish’ rough of existing shrubs, long grass and creepers.”

Some conservationists are coming around to the idea that golf is here to stay, says Jeffrey A. McNeely, chief scientist of the Swiss-based IUCN-World Conservation Union, the world's largest conservation network. With that in mind, they're shifting their focus from stopping course construction to ensuring that courses take steps to improve the sites on which they're built.

“All land use has an impact on the environment—the trick is to minimize damage and, where possible, enhance natural values,” says Mr. McNeely, a keen golfer himself. Golf courses can do it, he adds, but they need “effort, planning

and commitment.”

John MacKinnon, a biologist now working for a large European Union-funded biodiversity project in China, is also co-author of “Guidelines for Maximizing Biodiversity on Golf Courses,” published by the Asean Regional Centre for Biodiversity Conservation. “A well-managed golf course,” he argues in his book, “can provide more environmental benefits than a poorly managed nature reserve.”

I got involved myself late last year, when several colleagues and I created Igolf—the International Golf and Life Foundation, a not-for-profit Switzerland-based organization, to promote environmental and so-

cial responsibility in golf world-wide. We plan to run technical training seminars for course operators and to recognize courses that adhere to guidelines for responsible behavior.

In my travels around Asia I do see abuses. But I have also visited courses that show good management, and the trend seems cautiously encouraging. Certainly some Asian golf courses will continue to impinge on protected areas, use too many chemicals and disregard environmental regulations. Water use will continue to be a problem—a poorly designed golf course can use as much water as a small town. But increasingly, Asian courses are following the stricter standards of golf developers in the U.S. and Canada, Europe and Australia. Bangkok-based luxury hotel group Six Senses, for example, which makes environmental awareness part of its corporate identity, is seeking potential partners in Asia to develop golf courses. One criterion: Each owner-developer would have to adhere to company-developed standards of environmental management.

Why this new righteousness? Laws are helping, where they're applied. In Singapore, the Public Utilities Board—the national water agency—enforces strict water-quality regulations on the land along its reservoirs. In one example, Kranji Sanctuary Golf Course abuts the Kranji Reservoir, and some 10% of the course's land is set aside as a nature reserve to protect the water catchment. Economics is playing a role, too—some course operators recognize they could cut costs by reducing energy, water and chemical use, while others sense marketing possibilities. Thailand's Laguna Phuket Golf Club, for example, which limits chemical use, irrigates with gray water and has an environmental “no go” zone, sees potential in pitching the course as “green,” says Tim Haddon, director of golf.

Keeping that image in mind as I stand at the tee, I twist my hands slightly, sight my target and get ready to hit my drive.

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