With more and more of the tools of our trade being banned by our Brussels bureaucrats and our ‘Greens’, who live in mortal fear of killing off the planet if we carry on as we have been, we shall have to rethink our approach to problems which have always made fine turf management very difficult and where cures are progressively banned. The worst pests of golf greenkeeping are indubitably casting earthworms. It is being suggested that only recently have we discovered that there are non-casters and we should be looking at selective wormkillers. How typical! I was writing articles 46 years ago on earthworm activity and my erstwhile colleague and friend at the then Board of Greenkeeping Research, the late Peter Jefferson, researched this problem for his M.Sc. We both came to the same conclusion: it was a non-starter.

Earthworm control is beyond argument necessary. They may well be the farmers’ and the gardeners’ friend but they are the greenkeepers’ enemy. The problem is not just the unsightly casting and resultant smearing and muddiness of the affected turf, but interference with putting surfaces and winter playing conditions, weed invasion (from both buried seeds brought to the surface and in giving points of invasion for airborne seeds) and also subsidence (to which non-casting worms contribute), not to mention increased fertility (when we want the opposite in greenkeeping).

In my young days to describe someone as green meant they were inexperienced, naive or five green shield stamps short of a pop-up toaster. Today the term means something different. But does it? On reflection, our dear and often blinkered conservationists, many of whom seem to put invertebrate life ahead of human, should still be so described. On second thoughts however, who am I to be critical – there are some invertebrates which are infinitely to be preferred to certain so-called humans busily engaged in killing or starving their neighbours to death – and not just the third world, either.

I venture to propose a philosophy which will certainly bring down coals of fire on my head, but those turling them had better do their homework first. As with acid rain, now blamed more on cows and excessive conifer planting than on power stations; with prophets of global warming competing with those forecasting increased glaciation; with our low-lying east coast areas threatened with unlimited flooding because of perhaps a few inches extra high tides, we all listen (well, some do) to these harbingers of doom who persuade our bureaucrats – and ours are far worse even than those in Brussels – to ban everything in sight, replacing the tools of our trade with less efficient ones which in turn are later also proscribed as ‘dangerous’.

Let us take earthworm control. In my advisory life from 1946 the best advice was to use lead arsenate and I did this up to the early seventies, when it was banned. Yet I had never lost a greenkeeper in all those years, there were no cases of poisoned stock (except one case where a daft greenkeeper had washed out the drums after use in a local stream) and when I treated my own lawns, our black cats came back with white paws and he licked them clean and all he got was a much glossier coat and an increased zest for life. He lived another 14 years after that episode!

Lead arsenate was an ideal wormkiller. It was persistent, lasting an average of eight years and in some cases where re-invasion was slower, even longer. It stayed in the soil, did not leach, did not drift when applied and did not get into water supplies, being insoluble. However, despite the evidence of their own eyes – you could still see the lead arsenate in the soil years later – it was banned. Chlordane, with an effective life of 1-2 years, replaced it. It too has now been banned. We are now down to applying short term wormkillers several times a year. Surely the risk to environment, wild life and operators is far less, when carrying out an operation once in eight years than once in eight weeks?

I mentioned this point to Jon Albutt who at once supported my view, as this was his view too when trying to get the ban on Chlordane – a political decision made by those who were unrepentantly deaf to all reason and logic.

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However, as I was briskly informed by some of our continental E.C. barons laying down the law about golf course construction, 'you can mean as much as you like but there is nothing you can do about it and the sooner you accept defeat the better'.

So we must try to control earthworms and leather jackets (the two worst pests of fine turf in the U.K.) by other means. There is nothing new in this and of course we might look into persistent wormkillers such as derris dust used many years ago, displaced by the more efficient and cheaper (in the long run) lead arsenate.

Furthermore, even in fairly recent times, i.e. forty odd years ago, there was so little money in golf that poor clubs could not afford even modest expenditure on lead arsenate costing £122 ton in 1947, so we and they had to devise management methods avoiding direct use of pesticides.

The chief method of alternative earthworm control was to acidify the soil, generally by using sulphur, to bring alkaline soil (not earthworm activity), down to a pH of five or even higher. No self respecting earthworm would poke its nose into such a hostile environment! Sulphur of course takes months to oxidise and trials were and still are necessary to determine the optimum rate - to be decided not earlier than six months after laying down replicate trials from 1-4 oz sq yd (most commonly 2 ozs did the trick). Today sulphur is used for less laudable objectives than acidifying soil: as a constituent of explosive mixtures, so its purchase is looked on with a jaundiced eye by some authorities.

Other methods were to top dress heavily with sharp sintered ash (more like pulverised glass) and similar materials such as coke breeze, worked in after aeration. This firmly upped muddy fairways and certainly discouraged earthworms, but was pretty unpopular with golfers because of club damage.

Sometimes on links courses where local earthworm activity was a problem and of course against leather jackets, low lying areas (which attracted the crane flies and the worms initially because the grass was green and the soil moist) were flooded with sea water - which needed skill if you were not to risk severe yellowing. As it killed off the grasses we did not want and left the salt resistant links grasses, we tolerated any disturbance. We can therefore forget about that remote possibility.

The biggest encouragement of all, of course, comes from alkaline reacting materials. This is so widely recognised that one sees less of the horrors resulting from agricultural advice forty years ago - but one thing is certain; some fool will always come along to repeat all the mistakes made so many years ago, in the name of progress. Lime, of course, is rarely used though one sees photographs of courses where one cannot see the fairways for clouds of lime being applied to 'sweeten sour turf'. Such pictures are not all from the 1920s. It is not so many years ago that some of our heathland courses were being limed and even more recently given a dressing of basic slag, especially if the current chairman of green was a farmer! I am talking about the mid-sixties, even the seventies!

It is totally unrealistic to expect so-called research (really only investigation of known products and policies) to come up with a new wormkiller which is acceptable to the E.C. - and even if one cropped up by sheer accident it would cost millions to get it tested and passed by our obsessed bureaucrats, with no guarantee of it being passed for use after that astronomical expenditure. We can therefore forget about that remote possibility. Frankly we want glimpses of the obvious like a hole in the head and I for one cannot see any new management methods emerging, though one has to accept that with effective persistent wormkillers and pesticides so easily available, the incentive to develop such new methods was absent, in the past.

Trawling the technical papers of the temperate world's research organisations has, believe me, been done already by commercial concerns so is not likely to yield success! We might be better off in preparing cast iron cases to protect what few products we still possess against the interference of a host of busy bodies who would not know one end of an earthworm from the other.

Doubtless we shall get the usual manic minority talking about sonic booms, electrocution, or similar way-out methods of getting rid of that pest. However as I was brusquely informed by some of our continental E.C. barons laying down the law about golf course construction, 'you can mean as much as you like but there is nothing you can do about it and the sooner you accept defeat the better'.

In passing, will the uninformed realise the difference between thatch (uncomposed stagnant dead vegetation) and the head and I for one cannot see any new management methods emerging, though one has to accept that with effective persistent wormkillers and pesticides so easily available, the incentive to develop such new methods was absent, in the past.

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