



Gators and Golfers Don't Mix

By Kyle Sweet, CGCS, *The Sanctuary Club*

The role of today's golf course superintendent has evolved over the years to expand well beyond turf management. Many would agree that beyond managing the turf, the most rewarding part of the job is learning more about our environment. Environmentalism and golf course management exist hand-in-hand and are embraced by clubs with involvement in Audubon International's Sanctuary Golf Course Program and operating within the recommended Best Management Practices.

Creating, maintaining and improving wildlife habitats results in increased wildlife, and finding a balance between wildlife and golfers can be a tricky task.

Florida golf courses are known for their alligators. Admittedly, many seasonal golfers will seek them out to show to a guest and they commonly make for good conversation at the end of day. Often, the interaction between gator and golfer takes place while riding along a lake edge looking for that wayward shot that might just still be in play.

Instead, the golfer comes upon a sunning gator, that's half asleep and minding its own business. The gator will remain lying there... possibly thinking, "Hey, I was here first and I'm very comfortable. Thank you." Or it leaps up and thrashes into the water. The important thing is that both remain safe in this situation,

but avoiding this situation altogether would be even better.

Here are a couple of easy-to-implement ideas that may help our gators and our golfers.

Alligator Beach

Dr. Kent Vliet, University of Florida Coordinator of Laboratories for the Department of Biology and alligator behavioral expert, visited the Sanctuary Golf Club, Sanibel Island in 2010. During a course tour to view all of the lakes, a recommendation was made to create suitable areas for alligators to bask that were away from typical areas of play. The lakes are mostly vegetated along the banks, so it was necessary to pick areas less vegetated with the correct sun orientation and a subtle rise to provide the best scenario for the gators to use.

Following the tour and recommendation, two areas were chosen. The 9th hole was chosen as very suitable because it had seen several golfer and gator interactions. With a small loader, the lake bank was graded to allow easy access up the bank and dead palm logs were installed to provide a steep wall, deterring the gator from going toward the course once in the area. Important also was the location relative to the afternoon sun. The area



Above: Sanctuary crewmembers building a protective gator beach area. At top left: Gator sunning on a beach created on The Sanctuary Club. Photos by Kyle Sweet.

faces southwest, taking full advantage of the strongest seasonal sun for the gator to bask in. If desired, a covering in natural trimmings could have been placed in the area to camouflage it but was not necessary.

Now, after two years, our golfing members have recognized that “Gator Beaches” work. The gators are keeping happy in the sun away from play, and the golfers have a great area to view them. Win-Win!

Alligator Basking Platform

Paul Bradley, golf course superintendent at Bonita Bay’s Bay Island Club, has been managing his course for the past six years and has plenty of gators and golfers to keep happy. Paul has taken an interesting and effective approach in one of his several lakes that allows gators to bask well clear of his golfers by using a basking platform.



Sam Bradley, superintendent of the Bay Island Club, uses “gator docks” to lure gators away from the golf course.



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Paul began by researching some ideas for this platform online and incorporated his own ingenuity into what is now a very successful idea that was constructed completely in-house. One goal was to recycle products for the construction of the platform, so Paul incorporated 30-gallon, triple-rinsed-and-sealed chemical drums for flotation, PVC piping and fittings for hinges and polypropylene roping for fastening. Additional supplies included lumber and stainless steel fasteners, which in total combined for less than \$1000.

Once the platform was completed, it was transported to the course and placed in one of the club's larger lakes. Unfortunately, it was met with some criticism from nearby residents and was moved to another location. During the moving process, it was painted black and it was being used soon after installation. "First, we saw turtles,



Superintendent Paul Bradley (center) and Bonita Bay crew with a newly constructed gator platform. Photo by Maryle Barbe.

aningas, great egrets and everything but gators," explained Bradley. Soon, however, they realized their goal with the sighting of a big gator soaking up the sun. Now, golfers and staff can both view the gators using the platform while working and enjoying the course. Another win-win!

Alligators and golfers will continue to interact as long as there are golf courses in Florida. In many cases, we have created these watery habitats in our communities and courses and we can have an impact on the protection of both golfers and alligators. I'm sure golf in Florida wouldn't be the same without the enjoyment of wildlife, so good luck with your efforts.

Lake Masters Aquatic Management team gives Superintendent Paul Bradley and a gator dock a tow to its new location. Photo by Maryle Barbe.



Gator basking on platform at the Bonita Bay Club. Photo by Paul Bradley.