

# How 'green' is your course?

Jim Arthur believes some of the environmental activists have overstated their case and become anarchists, not conservationists.

**T**he trouble with any good idea is that so often it is in danger of suffering irreparable harm by being adopted by undeducated cranks who with their indisciplined and over-enthusiastic interpretations bring the whole concept into disrepute. Animal Rights activists who seem to rate all animals, even insects, as being more important than the human species, have by their militant actions discredited the entire campaign which has become synonymous with anarchy. I can assure you that what I relate is absolutely true. One such hairy anarchist was all set to put an old building to the torch on some pretext, until it was pointed out to him that the walls would be full of creepy crawlies who had an equal right to live - so he desisted!

Equally the 'Greens' have grossly overstated their case and so sensible-thinking conservationists find it harder to accept it. One example is the acid rain theory, for which no really convincing case can be made for *all* or even most defoliation of trees or loss of aquatic life.

In fact no less an authority than Dr. Philip Ineson of the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology is reported as stating, in the roundest possible terms, "there isn't a single tree in the UK of which someone can say, this has died of acid rain".

For one thing, if the U.K. is responsible for arboricultural problems in Scandinavia, does the air borne acidity propel itself against the Easterlies, which prevail for most of the year - and when, even with South Westerlies, the

associated rainfall reduces its travel? Many Swedish lakes have *NEVER* had any aquatic life in recorded times, e.g. from mediaeval maps. Furthermore, we in this country should suffer as much or more than those countries further distant from reputed sources of pollution, and we do not. The problem of acidification is nothing new and on the whole must be considered, but a major cause is the excessive planting of conifers and associated increased acid run-off. This is now admitted by the Forestry Commission who confess they "got it wrong".

New planting at Kielder in Northumberland, England's largest (150,000 acre) man-made forest, will consist of 10% of native hardwoods "to improve the landscape and environment", replacing those solid rectangular plantings of Sitka spruce, marching over the Border hills.

In any case it should be remembered that on heavy land courses at least, we *want* acidity to lock up excessive fertility, which would otherwise produce lush meadows, not fairways. Our best and finest turf grows on the poorest soils.

On one course which I visited recently, great concern was expressed that acid rain was killing their trees. This was incidentally on a heather



March orchids by the fairway at Trevose golf course Cornwall

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course where fifteen years ago, everything was dressed with basic slag which killed all the heather! The trees, about a score at most, were 40-50 year old birches dying on their feet from old age and a few smothered oaks and pines which were being choked under the canopy of their larger and more aggressive neighbours. If one does not manage forestry and neglects routine thinning to give the survivors room to grow, then nature will do the job itself, - but less tidily.

Our main problem on most courses after traffic, is that there are too many trees - often totally alien and 'unsympathetic' to their environment. That awful invasive alien Sycamore, delightful as a single, majestic mature tree, has just about destroyed much of our unfarmed downland. Many forest trees are planted where they have no room to reach even semi-maturity and soon interfere with play. Seedling birches and even oaks and pines invade our heather courses and turn them into woods. If culled in the seedling stage, this is accepted as correct management, but just let those invaders become established and many members start agonised objections the moment they hear a chain saw.

Sadly, now that the Nature Conservancy can no longer employ cheap Y.T.S. labour (quite correctly, of course) organised scrub clearance has stopped. Birches need no second invitation. Left even for a few years the task of clearing, including stump removal to prevent even worse regeneration, becomes highly expensive. Yet such is the emotive thinking of ignorant 'preservationists' that they managed to put a tree preservation order on felled birch stumps at one golf course extension, to prevent them being grubbed out - and the (temporary!) result was an impenetrable, rubbishy wilderness.

Too many of our old heathland courses in the past 60 years become woodland ones, and this is a very poor alternative to true parkland conditions, where a few isolated mature trees define layout and impose severe penalties for mishit strokes.

There are too many cases where semi-mature trees have been allowed to grow, restricting teeing space or otherwise impeding vision of the full green from every part of the tee. Worse still, instead of grubbing out the offending tree, it is savagely lopped, to become a hideous caricature, and the problem is merely postponed. Everyone planting a tree must have the knowledge to realise what it is going to look like and whether it will have room to develop to



*Broomrape at Trevoze golf course maturity.*

Choice of trees is always important, not just for aesthetic reasons, but because it is reasonable to suppose that the native trees suit the soil and environment and vice versa. Yet a short distance from where I write, quick growing and totally alien Leylandii conifers are being planted on a golf course - and quite apart from looking totally out of character, they will of course, blow over when they get taller, being so shallow rooting.

Conservation - true conservation not preservation - has many facets but clearly golf courses, in common with motorway verges, are becoming some of our best wildlife sanctuaries as they suffer far less from the unwelcome incursions and disturbances of that dangerous predator - man.

Many golf courses have established unofficial - and in some cases official - reserves to protect a 'speciality; from rare orchids to sand lizards; from a rare if inconspicuous flora to natterjack toads. Sensibly, we should always enlist the support of those professional conservationists, the Nature Conservancy officials and the trained employed staff of County Wildlife Trusts, who themselves suffer severely at the hands of their over-enthusiastic but ignorant and emotive dear lady members who believe every scare-mongering report they read.

We also suffer in greenkeeping from the influence of 'greens' in our efforts to grow healthy grass. Our mainstay insecticides, fungicides and herbicides are progressively being banned. The reason for the ban is often, that they are persistent - yet a moments thought will show that to deal with persistent pests we need long lasting control. Otherwise we will be constantly dosing our courses with short lived and ineffective control products, which is not only needlessly expensive, but

could create as many problems as it resolves.

Research has very belatedly attempted to find answers to this serious problem. Of course there were careless and ignorant users of mildly toxic products - mainly farmers who could more afford the high costs of massive overdosage, - but enlightened education would produce better as well as safer results.

I was astounded during my visit to a number of American courses to discover the way they had found round a ban on worm killers was to apply a ten fold overdose of a permitted fungicide, which killed everything grass and worms alike, and they then reseeded!

Meanwhile, all we can do is to attempt to prevent such problems occurring. It is all very well saying that proper management, a low fertiliser regime (and especially the avoidance of one slow release source of nitrogen which has become synonymous with *Fusarium* patch disease and thatch), and the clearance of shading trees will avoid disease. However what do we do when foolish greenkeeping, perhaps twenty years ago has left a legacy of problems, e.g. earth worm casting from stupid liming (advised "because the soil is acid") or disease attacking susceptible annual meadow grass turf caused by gross over-feeding with NPK in earlier years?

Money should be expended on researching these urgent priorities and not wasted on irrelevancies to prove what we already know - even if this may dissuade those building sand-only greens from repeating predictable disasters. What price pure sand greens when there is a total ban and using water on golf courses!

Education, as in all walks of life, is the key to correct assessment of all problems - and if only the 'Greens' would educate themselves better, they would make fools of themselves less frequently.

One gets so sick of hearing that some event is the "worst disaster since Chernobyl". In fact Chernobyl, bad though it was and caused by gross incompetence, killed directly about 30 people and the official estimated world wide lethal after-effect is much less of a risk than my being knocked down by a London double decker bus in Budeleigh Salterton High Street! How is it that we, so unfairly labelled the dirty men of Europe, have suffered some contamination of North Western Moorland from Russia and in the same breath are accused of polluting countries to the East of us with wind-borne acidity?