

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENTS:

LAW OR

Golf course developers and owners could be forgiven for being confused over the whole issue of Environmental Assessments (EA). Without some analysis of the environmental impact of a proposed course, planning permission may be difficult if not impossible to achieve. Yet, under the terms of EC Directive 85/337, adopted here in 1988, golf courses are not included in the list of sites requiring EA as a condition of development.

In most cases, the local planning authority is only likely to call on developers or owners to undertake a full EA where the proposed site is in or near an area with special landscape designation such as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) or a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This is also likely to apply where additional development, for example, a hotel complex, is planned as part of the scheme.

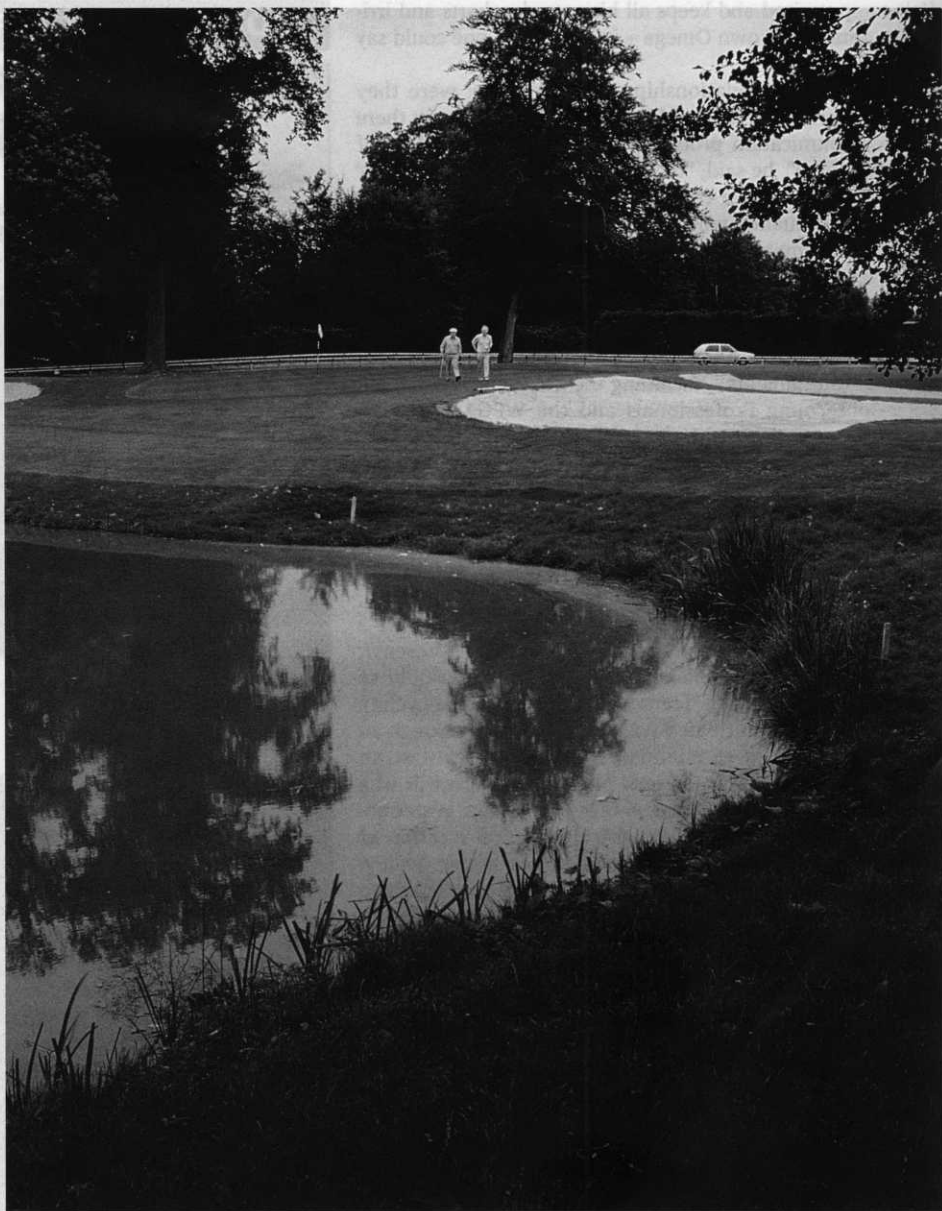
The situation does however vary between councils. In many cases, local plans will include a catch-all policy which gives general guidance on environmental considerations without requesting an actual assessment. For example, the Coventry Unitary Development Plan states that 'proposals for the development of outdoor sport and recreation facilities will normally be permitted provided that - any associated development maintains the existing character of the landscape; the activity is compatible with, and sympathetic to the immediate locality, and it is managed to achieve a balance between the needs of the activity and nature conservation.' In contrast both New Forest and Salisbury District Councils seek some form of evidence that there will be no adverse impact, or that the impact will be mitigated. This is effectively a requirement to produce a form of EA, although this may not be the full assessment as defined by the EC Directive.

Benefits

It is important to remember that EA should not be viewed merely as a means of gaining planning permission. It should also provide the basis for environmentally-responsible design; as the most successful courses, in both commercial and environmental terms, are those which emerge from the recommendations of the EA.

There are also financial implications. The EA will often highlight the need for essential work. By identifying, at an early stage, landscape or wildlife features that will have to be considered, it may even save money. Consider the alternative - if, for example, design work has been carried out prior to EA it may be rendered obsolete by the results. The design philosophy of the course could then require a radical rethink.

The EA may also offer benefits in terms of the developer's relationship with the local community. The assessment might include a dialogue with local residents and representatives of nature conservation groups who are



Incorporation of existing trees and natural water bodies into the design enhances the environmental value of the course as in this example on Meon Valley Golf and Country Club

likely to be aware of special plants or wildlife on a site. By undertaking this consultation process, the developer will allay fears about the development and reduce the risk of planning appeals.

Process

So what does an Environmental Assessment entail? Essentially, it is a means of ensuring that the likely impact of a new development on the environment is fully understood before the development is allowed to proceed. A full assessment will look at a broad range of issues surrounding the impact of a proposal, at a level of detail which matches the scale of likely impact of the development. It usually describes and analyses the site, the development and its likely effects, and suggests measures that could be taken to mitigate any negative

impacts. It also usually highlights positive environmental benefits.

Among the aspects covered are the impact of the proposed development on vegetation, wildlife, soil, water, air, climate, human beings and cultural heritage, and the interaction between these.

Historic landscapes in particular are threatened by golf course development, and the EA will concentrate on historical research and field study, often with professional advice from organisations such as English Heritage, to ensure that such concerns are fully addressed.

Such a comprehensive survey is time-consuming and therefore may seem costly for smaller developments, or those which are outside areas of particular landscape importance. In such cases it is often possible to undertake a more restricted assessment. The Institute of

RESPONSIBILITY?

Environmental Assessment is able to provide names of specialists to advise on the level of assessment which would be suitable for a particular site.

There is no doubt though that some form of assessment, even if a full EA in accordance with EC Directives is not required, will significantly ease the path of an application through the planning system, as local authorities will in practice be better disposed towards a development when briefed on the likely environmental impact.

It is also a case of the earlier the better. Environmental considerations must be taken into account at an early stage in the design process, if the right balance is to be achieved between conserving the environment and meeting the needs of golfers.

Principles

Whilst it is difficult to generalise on the recommendations that an EA will make, there are some general principles that environmentally conscious golf course developers should consider:

- retain and where possible enhance natural features such as streams and ditches.
- avoid the creation of artificial topography.
- avoid use of bunkers if possible or locate them where they will be unobtrusive.
- consider the visual impact of the design from nearby roads, footpaths or houses, and respect these views.
- retain the planting type that has developed on the site and plant native species of trees and shrubs.
- ensure that there is a gentle transition between the edge of the course and surrounding countryside, by allowing more space than might be absolutely necessary.

Over recent years, developers of golf courses have argued vigorously for planning permission on the grounds that golf courses are environmentally friendly, in that they have a nature conservation role and open up previously private land for public enjoyment.

In many cases this is true, particularly where environmental considerations have been taken into account not only in the design but in other aspects such as maintenance, where for example, by keeping the mowing of roughs to a minimum, reducing the use of fertilisers and ensuring that chemicals do not contaminate water bodies, the ecological value of a course can be enhanced.

One thing is certain, developers of new courses, or those planning to extend existing ones, should be wary of complacency about the environmental status of the site. Experience suggests that while an EA may not be formally required, developers who fail to undertake some study of environmental impact will probably live to regret it.

■ **LATE NEWS:** The Government has just announced proposals which would require formal environmental assessments for golf courses if the proposal is in a national park, an



Utilisation of natural contours enables the golf course to blend into the surrounding countryside, as in this example on Meon Valley Golf and Country Club



Letting the rough grow wild encourages a diverse habitat for both flora and fauna as in this example on Meon Valley Golf and Country Club

AONB, an SSSI or a heritage coast. Golf courses proposed in so-called 'historic landscapes' may also require environmental assessment. At this stage, the proposals are included in a consultation paper issued by the D of E but they are expected to be included in regula-

tions to be issued after the consultation period.

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