



the Learning experience

Golf and nature can be made to work in harmony

Growing public concern over the environmental impact of golf courses put the industry on the defensive in the mid to late 1980s.

A spate of new course developments, many situated in some of the most beautiful parts of the United Kingdom, provided support for the arguments of those who preferred to see the countryside remain as it was.

In some cases, the planning authorities agreed. In others, they listened carefully to both sides and realised that perhaps golf courses are not as damaging to the environment as pictured by the "anti's".

These battles, whether they were won or lost, had a major effect on the way in which golf courses now present themselves to the public. Instead of apologising for being there, clubs have moved onto the offensive and are actively demonstrating how a well managed golf course, rather than damaging nature, can actually provide substantial ecological and community benefits.

Faced with a hostile environmental activist, greenkeepers should remind the person that golf courses actually help conserve green spaces which might otherwise have been lost forever or fallen into total neglect.

In addition to providing a place for quiet recreation, a golf course enhances and protects wildlife habitats, giving flora and fauna a safe place in which to flourish. In virtually every case, a golf course will help improve the landscape by bringing professional land management practices to poor grade farmland, run-down parks and woodland, reclaimed landfill sites and other areas which, due to their location, topography or cost of improvement, would never otherwise attract sufficient investment.

It is often overlooked that course managers and greenkeepers are among the best educated and most conscientious users of chemical management aids in any industry.

Most of those responsible for course maintenance entered the profession because of a love of nature and the outdoor life and are totally committed to conserva-



Man and machine in harmony with nature at The Gleneagles Hotel

tion. Surveys carried out in the USA have shown that course superintendents give top priority to maintenance practises that do not have a negative effect on the environment. It would be safe to assume that the same aim applies the world over.

Environmentalists would do well to recognise that, in comparison with the surrounding industrial, farming or urban areas, a golf course is one of the most ecologically sound places on the planet.

Some will argue that flags, bunkers and closely mown turf are not part of a natural rural landscape, but surely these are preferable to a six lane highway, an industrial estate or an overgrown field of weeds "set-aside" as the answer to agricultural over-production?

While the recent mushrooming of new courses has dragged golf into the environmental spotlight, it is worth reminding the objectors that the industry has been commercially active for at least 100 years, playing its part as a tax-paying, land-improving, socially-responsible employer.

Anyone wanting a good example of how nature and a long-established golf course can walk hand in hand should be directed towards the environmental programme being pursued at Gleneagles.

Located in the wonderful countryside of the Perthshire hills, Gleneagles has established an integrated ecological management plan to preserve and enhance the delicate balance of nature within its 830 acre estate

and the surrounding area.

The plan works in harmony with Gleneagles' support for the Scottish Golf Course Wildlife Trust initiative, designed to create a greater awareness among Scottish golf clubs, their members and visitors of their responsibility towards good environmental and monitoring practices.

Planning and building of the newest course at Gleneagles – the Nicklaus-designed Monarch's – presented an ideal opportunity for the whole management of the estate to be considered while analysing maintenance practices and their impact on both the local and surrounding environment.

Studies began with a look back at pre-historic events and how the movement of ice and melt waters had helped shape the land mass, forming the stadium ridges which separate the fairways to create some of the finest natural grandstands in championship golf. Closer sub-surface examination revealed rich seams of sand and gravel beneath the turf – deposits which are preserved for perpetuity by golf.

Having examined the geological aspects of the area, attention focused on the many species of flower, grass, tree and shrub native to Gleneagles. Some rarities were found and these are included within a number of marked out areas where every species is counted and noted. Regular monitoring allows a close eye to be kept on how the flora responds to changes in management techniques, enabling the latter to be adjusted or altered to

maintain an ecological balance.

In the past, Gleneagles admits that it looked upon the management of its estate and golf courses principally in terms of whether they looked tidy, not really being aware of the real environmental issues.

Although Gleneagles has 20 sites of scientific interest, including one SSSI, all of which have been protected and cared for, they had been treated in isolation and not in relation to the whole estate.

This attitude has now changed with a balanced approach ensuring that the complete area is treated and managed as an entity. Management is needed because, left unchecked, nature would run riot with invasive species choking out those which support the more delicate and vulnerable ecosystems at Gleneagles.

"Conservation is not about leaving nature alone," points out Jimmy Kidd, Director of Turf Grass Management, Gleneagles Golf Developments. "It is essential that we lend a hand to maintain the balance. The alternative would be walls of gorse along every fairway, beech trees covering the King's, pines invading the rough on the Queen's, weeds running riot on the Monarch's and the Laich Loch within the formal garden becoming silted up."

The philosophy at Gleneagles, and one which can be applied in some way at every golf course in the world, is that it is much simpler to maintain a course in harmony with its natural surroundings than to create something totally unnatural.

This means that the course, its architecture, layout and maintenance must fit in with all else around. If changes are deemed necessary, consider them carefully and then make them gradually so that possible impact on the environment is minimised.

Native plants and trees and the natural lie of the land have been utilised since golf began to give a course its unique character while helping it harmonise with its surroundings. Removing or altering one or the other, or bringing in a species totally alien to the area, is likely to fuel anti-golf course sentiments far more than a few flag sticks or tee boxes.