

Communication

There are many examples of good conservation practice on golf courses. The benefits to the quality of the course and game can be considerable. At the heart of successfully balancing the needs of the golfer and those of the natural heritage, is communication.

For same time now, it has been shown that golf course management can be environmentally friendly. Across the UK, individual courses are taking steps to maintain the quality of their courses, in harmony with the natural heritage. For many of these clubs, this has been a proactive step based on a concern for golf. However, these clubs have also recognised that their positive actions will have had real benefit to their natural surroundings.

In other words, what is of benefit to golfing quality may also be highly valuable to our natural heritage. I say "may", because there is often a fine line between improving golfing and environmental quality, and having a detrimental effect on both. For example, improvement to a golf course may result from tree plant-



The Scottish Golf Course Wildlife Group was founded in 1992, a partnership of organisations from the environmental and golfing sectors.

In April of this year the Scottish Golf Union, supported by funding from Scottish Natural Heritage, The Scottish Greenbelt Company and the R&A appointed a Wildlife Advisor. The aim of the post is to work with the group in an attempt to bring together the interests of the golfing and environmental sectors. The post, the first of its kind in Europe, will look into all aspects of interaction between golf and the environment, including new golf course developments, greenkeeper training and conservation on existing courses.

In this article Jonathan Smith writes about the approach of the Wildlife Group in unlocking the potential of golf courses, and preserving their inherent value.

ing, pond creation or perhaps a change in rough or scrub management. However, it is also possible that such alterations can have a detrimental effect to the course. Tree planting may not always be the most suitable option, pond creation involves many considerations which may effect other aspects of course management; such as drainage or maintenance. Conservation is as much about what is not done, as much as what is done. There are many cases where clubs have acted in haste, only to repent at

leisure when the true implications of their actions became apparent.

This is one of many reasons why communication is vital. Communication with outside organisations and individuals, and communication within the club.

Many clubs are beginning to appreciate that by working to protect and enhance the natural value of their courses, they are conserving the quality of the golf course. Newtonmore Golf Club, in the heart of the Cairngorms, for example have been keen to work locally with, in their case, Scottish

Natural Heritage. Together, they have managed successfully to protect an area of rough which is rich in wild flowers, particularly orchids. Around eight different varieties of orchid have been found on the site. The Management Agreement drawn up for the site shows a commendable commitment by the club to assist in the protection of some of Scotland's most threatened habitat – unimproved grassland.

This positive attitude comes at a time of global concern for our natural environment. From individuals to large companies, people are accepting responsibility for their actions. Golf courses have a major part to play.

The knowledge and enthusiasm of the Course Manager or Greenkeeper and their staff can play a significant role in conserving many of our threatened habitats and species. They can have a tangible effect on issues of high sensitivity such as water quantity and quality. The potential, positive contribution by golf courses towards protecting the environment is vast.

Now is the time when more of that potential should be realised. Golf courses have the opportunity to establish themselves as leaders in industry and the environment. If we can demonstrate that clubs are taking sensitive, educated steps to integrate their activities into the needs of our natural and cultural heritage, then we will have done much to blunt the criticisms of those who see golf in a purely negative environmental light.

On the continent, for example, the anti-golf lobby is active in portraying golf course management, and new golf course development as a scourge of the landscape. In certain cases there is factual evidence of this, and therefore it would be wrong to assume that all golf courses and development automatically enhance the environment but the positive impact that golf can have should not be underestimated. All clubs should be aware that they can contribute in terms of conservation. They have the land and the equipment. Positive steps can range from erecting bird and bat boxes, to assessing the overall management of the course. What-



Balancing management techniques over the whole course can avoid over- and under-intensive management. Picture of Gineagles' Queen's Course courtesy of Scottish Natural Heritage

s the key

ever the level of commitment, it is on the golfers' terms and thus can be integrated without disruption to the course. It makes sense though for clubs to seek expert ecological advice, in order to maximise the potential benefit that their actions could have.

There are many organisations and individuals who can provide constructive input to golf clubs. This may be in the form of information or advice, and perhaps even grant assistance. Whatever the level of input, it is the cooperative approach which will ultimately benefit golf and the environment in the long-term.

'There is no reason why the current trend of golf course management, combined with environmental awareness, should not continue'

The Scottish Golf Course Wildlife Group, through the Advisor, is in a position to establish and assist in this communication. We would like to see localised contact between golf clubs and environmental groups. We are aware that this may already take place, both cooperatively, and occasionally in conflict, and the Group are working hard to try to bring the thinking of the golfer and the conservationist ever closer together.

Let us not forget that many cases of conflicting interest could have been avoided through immediate consultation between parties.

We are realistic in terms of what we would like to achieve. As a partnership of environmental and golfing organisations, that realism is met by a desire to raise greater awareness of environmental issues across the golfing sector and to demonstrate how golf and nature can work in harmony in the future. An important step in achieving this is also to promote golfing issues across the environ-

mental sector. There is a need for mutual understanding.

There is no reason why the current trend of golf course management, combined with environmental awareness should not continue. Greenkeepers, at the heart of this concept are becoming increasingly aware that it is possible to manage their courses to benefit golf and the natural heritage, and are accepting the responsibility of their role. We would encourage clubs and managers to formalise this management in some way so that actions can be planned and assessed, and examples pulled together which show more clearly how "green" golf can be. Thus far, only a few clubs have taken this step. Linlithgow Golf Club, a lowland golf course in the agricultural landscape of West Lothian, has shown that environmental objectives can be integrated into an existing management plan at little extra cost. By looking at the course as a whole they have been able to establish management objectives which combine golfing and environmental quality.

Indeed it is often the case that clubs are over intensively managing certain areas of the course, eg. rough, ponds and ditches; and neglecting other areas eg. mature woodlands, hedgerows and ponds.

Linlithgow's efforts indicate that integrated management should not be confined to the larger, wealthier clubs and organisations, but is an achievable step for all clubs, with valuable results.

The examples cited are just two of many which show how different clubs are actively undertaking conservation practices on their courses. They may be different clubs, but they share one common technique - communication. At the centre of the valuable conservation efforts of golf clubs lies cooperation. The enthusiasm to take action, the desire to seek advice and the ability to accept assistance are vital in enhancing the game of golf and the natural environment on which it depends.

The Scottish Golf Course Wildlife Advisor is open to requests for advice on all aspects of golf course management, on any scale. This advice is free of charge and obligation.

Drizabone?

Ocmis

01460 241939

AD
REF
360