

Erosion issue questioned

I am surely not alone in questioning the dogmatic forecasts of impending doom on our links courses as expressed at the St Andrews' Conference 'On course for Change,' let alone statements which are debatable, such as that sea levels around our coasts have risen 15-20 cm in the past twenty years ie; less than one centimetre per year. I am sure that someone will tell us how such minute rises are measured – on the same lines as greenkeepers stating that they set their height of cut in terms of fractions of a millimetre!! Even in these computerised days, how can they measure such microscopic differences?

One thing is certain – that such pessimistic forecasts that climatic changes will destroy our famous links are made by "experts" on weather who know nothing about golf and less about coastal protection. No one denies that there are changes in weather patterns but there always have been for centuries. Prophets of doom and gloom all throughout the ages have virtually always been confounded by events. At regular intervals over the past 200 years we have been told that there will be mass starvation as this earth of ours cannot produce enough food to feed exploding populations. Yet, today, the problems are all to do with distribution and very little to do with production. Whatever happened to the millennium bug?

The most sensible comment on weather changes was made to me by a senior officer at the Met office who said that we were dealing with imponderables and that rash forecasts of disaster based on straight line graphs were certain to be proved wrong by events.

Coastal erosion, by wind as well as waves, has been going on for centuries as for example at Dunwich in Suffolk where no less than eight churches lie beneath the advancing sea – the first going back to 800 AD and clearly that had nothing to do with global warming.

Virtually all coastal erosion is due to man's activities, varying from destabilisation of dunes by pedestrian traffic and scrambler bikes, to off-shore or estuarine dredging, the construction of long jetties; uncoordinated defence schemes (which merely transfer the problem along the coast) and to altering the course of rivers. Global warming simply does not enter the equation.

It is simply not true to say that properly planned and comprehensive protection schemes are ineffective, though gales breach them. As someone who has been involved in such golf links schemes for over thirty years, I am the first to admit that in

some cases I had to say that there was no answer, eg; where a huge jetty had been built 20 miles away so altering the set of the tides that little could be done to save the sand, while in other cases the astronomical expense of a fully comprehensive scheme ruled it out, but in the main most schemes have worked well – especially where pedestrians have been banned.

One statement that our famous links will inevitably lose holes and have to migrate inland is demonstrably utter nonsense! In many cases there is nowhere to go. Furthermore our links courses have stabilised the dunes – and where this has not occurred, fairways have been buried in wind-blown sand. Talk of courses migrating inland as new dune structures cover the old are fiction, because not only would the courses be covered but also agricultural land and even housing.

Nearly all the evidence produced by these experts is capable of different interpretations is nothing new and will be contradicted by events. Almost always, unforeseen inter-related balancing influences reduce extreme effects.

Congratulations are due to those practical men who observe the effects of wind and tide and devise schemes which trap blowing sand or stop it being washed away and which work despite the scarcely concealed derision of the boffins. Admittedly, such schemes have to be planned on a broad scale and need regular attention but they work. The biggest worry is the sheer cost, though chestnut paling is far better than gabions in many cases and vastly cheaper. Here's a toast to such eminently practical stalwarts as George Brown at Turnberry and Cyril Sutherland at Brancaster whose effective measures have harnessed those very elements which threaten their courses. I have always valued the ideas of practical men and experts should do the same instead of dismissing them as amateurs. They should remember the first precept of problem solving namely correct observation, followed by correct deduction.

Many are good at the first but hopeless at the second. Of course we must note what is going on but the doom and gloom brigade need to accept that nature is a very tough and resilient old bird and can be constructive as well as destructive. I speak from a lifetime of working as a team with practical men on the ground as well as learned academics, some of whom were man enough to go round with me and admit that an ounce of practice is worth a ton of theory!

J.H Arthur, Budleigh Salterton
East Devon

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