



On the Soapbox

Bob Taylor, Head of Ecology & Environment at STRI, takes to the Soapbox and looks back over this evolving industry

When Scott MacCallum asked me to contribute to the Soapbox a slight apprehensive feeling came over me.

Well it would.

I am not, as everyone knows, a person who is given to ranting on different issues that affect our industry but then, given the cold light of day I probably am.

In fact, isn't that all that I have been doing for the last 20 years, remaining defiant when speaking out for the plight of the environment within golf.

Over the years I have pushed golf clubs to take stock of the environment in which they play and manage it for both golf and for wildlife.

I have also used legislation as a driver to generate awareness and encourage motivation, to ensure that best practices are adopted and adhered to. This is not a bad thing, far from it.

Collectively as an industry we have taken on a level of responsibility towards the environment that is unsurpassed.

Which other industries can boast the reclamation of 23 hectares of heathland, the reinstatement of over 1127 linear metres of hedgerow, the expansion of our grassland resource and all this arising from projects like the EGU Ecological Advisory Service.

STRI along with organisations like The Golf Environment Organisation, BIGGA, The R&A and Home Unions have created a wealth of literature geared towards managing the environment, but yet it seems strange to me that there are still many golf clubs out there that give little attention to their environmental responsibilities and are still dragging their feet and this can have ramifications for others.

Twenty years ago ecology was a buzzword, rather like sustainability is today, the main difference is perhaps that ecology is a term specifically related to species and the places in which they live, sustainability brings social and economic factors into the equation, changing our approach to golf course management in managing as a commercial modern business.

Even 20 years on I still regularly hear the old chestnut that this is a golf course and not a nature reserve, the reality is, that while a nature reserve can be specifically set up for wildlife, golf clubs have another overriding function ie. that of golf.

This is in fact the reason why so many areas throughout the country are being given special protected status by way of the

Site of Special Scientific Interest designation (SSSI). There is clearly no way that all golf courses could be given elevated scientific status but that does not mean that they do not contribute positively to wildlife and wildlife conservation. Many are indeed important staging posts for wildlife passing through.

They provide linkage with other important sites and they do protect some of our rarest and most vulnerable wildlife.

Individual golf clubs are functioning as individual business units, their main focus is income generation through visitor and member retention.

It always strikes me as odd that golf clubs pour all their resources into their greens, giving them ultimate priority and while this is clearly necessary very little resource is given to the environment in which they sit.

How many players would return again and again to play the course if it were not for the contribution of the environment and the pleasure gained from it.

this would never be the case unless some underlying factor such as poor performance in the past, pollution etc lies at the heart of the matter.

We must stop thinking that ecological management is for richer golf clubs, which probably make up less than 10% of the 3,300 golf clubs now established throughout the UK.

Just think of the contribution that the remaining 90% can have on protecting and conserving our nations wildlife.

It was Steve Oultram from Wilmslow Golf Club who once said:

"I like to think that I am managing this golf course so that my children and grandchildren can still benefit from the wildlife that I at Wilmslow have come to enjoy."

That perhaps in a nutshell sums it up, the wildlife that we all take for granted will not be there in the future unless we as custodians of a very special and unique landscape manage in a way that will conserve it for present and future generations.

Protect our wildlife

Environment gives beauty to the game, it adds interest, challenge, history, nature and above all a real feeling of wellbeing.

The more time I spend in Europe, particularly within the Scandinavia, the more I realise that potential visitors are seeking golf clubs with good social, environmental and ethical performance.

Golf Clubs providing this are thus better placed to attract and retain visitor numbers who share these values.

The more we do for the environment, the easier it will be when it comes to seeking planning permission for developmental change.

A golf club with a good track record, compared with direct competitors may gain advantage through public approval and acceptance.

Bear in mind however that good performance needs to be balanced with disclosure of performance, good and bad, hence the need for auditing, record keeping and periodic review.

I still visit golf clubs that remain worried that if they highlight their ecological interests they may be stopped from implementing traditional management practices,



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The views expressed within On The Soapbox are not necessarily those of Greenkeeper International