

Managing with less in the land of the Kiwi

“Cape Kidnappers, one of the most spectacular golf courses in the world, is very conscious of best environmental practice and managing with less, and Course Manager Brad Sim recently won the GCSAA’s International Environment Leaders in Golf Award”

Greenkeepers based in New Zealand are facing as many tough challenges as their UK colleagues. Here Malcolm Peake gives an insight into how they're addressing problems and achieving outstanding results with their creative style of management

Golf clubs in New Zealand are finding it difficult to survive meaning superintendents and committees have to think outside the box. There are over 400 golf courses in the country, and some of the smallest clubs cannot even afford green staff, so members are pulling together to maintain the course.

Wairoa Golf Club

Wairoa Golf Club is an 18 hole 5700 yard course and has 70 members who pay a \$410 subscription - about £200. It's a great little course, and right at the heart of the community with a mix of Maori and Pakeha (not of Maori decent) members.

A team of five members mow the course, and one has taken a New Zealand Sports Turf Institute (NZSTI) course to qualify for spraying and proficiency in basic course management. This mainly farming community are experts at handling machinery, and luckily the old Jim Arthur adage "ask a farmer what to do, then do the opposite" does not apply.

The club works closely with their NZSTI agronomist, who is aware of their limited financial resources and pitches his report accordingly. Watering and fertilising are kept to a minimum with the agronomist advising the common sense approach based on the colour of the green.

The greens are mown at 5mm and have some good areas of browntop bent, but also poa, couch, an indigenous variety of paspalum, and fescue.

Around twenty years ago the club planted copses of pinus radiata in strategic areas around the course but also as an investment for the future, the pines are now mature and a local forester has valued the trees at \$55,000 (£26,000) if they are felled. The club plans to replant native trees if some can be found of a future marketable value, and this will continue the legacy for future generations.

The club have also applied for funding for innovative conservation projects, with a view to enhancing existing wetland areas, ponds and streams and generally improving the whole habitat for native and endangered species – a really inspirational project.

Hopefully this can be achieved with the help of two local naturalists, and working with the local community and schools. Wairoa hopes to prove that golf courses are

not just for playing golf but can play an important role in protecting and enhancing New Zealand's native wildlife.

Another creative idea to generate extra income and encourage new members is a twilight nine-hole Texas Scramble, local companies are invited to enter teams of staff and customers. The evenings have become a great success, bringing in extra income, new members, and community involvement. One guest did turn up to play in wellingtons, shorts and a vest which even by Kiwi standards was a little too relaxed, but he was made welcome, and returned more appropriately dressed on the next occasion!

Paraparaumu Beach Golf Club

The next port of call was Paraparaumu Beach Golf Club. This is one of the greatest courses in the southern hemisphere - an undulating links which has held 12 New Zealand Opens. The great Peter Thomson said about the course "I loved it instantly. We had nothing like it in Australia – a monument to the game and a gift to the future. And the winds will ever blow to test the golfers' will and integrity." The course was designed in 1949 by Alex Ross who worked with Alister MacKenzie.

The club with the support of the NZSTI is restoring the course to a true links. The greens are now about 50/50 browntop bent and poa annua, are cut in summer at 3.5mm and are very firm and quick, and the fairways - a mix of fescue/bent/poa – run fast. Paraparaumu is reducing its course overheads and is being managed environmentally responsibly. The turf was not a uniform green, but was the perfect surface on which to play golf.

Manawatu Golf Club

The following day I visited Manawatu Golf Club. The club claims the title of the country's oldest golf course – it was founded in 1895 and boasts 1,300 members. Over the years the tree-lined fairways had grown out of proportion to the site and many inappropriate species had been planted.

The advisers have developed a long-term plan for felling a selection of trees to improve air and light circulation for the benefit of the turf. The course is a challenging layout with firm fast greens, which contrast in style with lush soft fairways and approaches, making for a target style of golf. A putting green has been developed with one half





ABOVE: Paraparaumu, 5th hole; LEFT: Paraparaumu Club President Ken Chariton mowing a green and BELOW: Discussing the greens at Cape Kidnappers



about the author



Malcolm Peake was Chairman of Green then Course Consultant at Temple GC in Berkshire. He has visited many golf courses around the world and has also worked on the R&A Golf Course Advisory Panel. He's also written "Confessions of a Chairman of Green" and "A Natural Course for Golf".

Malcolm would like to thank all the team at the NZSTI particularly Megan Cushman and the superintendents at the courses he visited for the information and hospitality.

lasered perfectly flat as requested by professional golfers.

I then visited the nearby headquarters of the NZSTI. Firstly we were shown a putting green used by staff. One side was USGA spec the other local sand for a long-term comparison, and then to the research plots where herbicides, recycled glass construction and summer grass were being studied. This was mainly to help clubs be more environmentally responsible - and also save money.

Cape Kidnappers

Our final visit was to Cape Kidnappers - a Tom Doak design of nearly 7200 yards, a par 71 off the back tees, and one of the most spectacular golf courses in the world. This top end resort course is very conscious of best environmental practice and managing with less, and Course Manager Brad Sim recently won the GCSAA's International Environment Leaders in Golf Award.

Cape Kidnappers preserves and enhances wildlife habitats, and a predator-proof fence around the 2500ha site - protected by two staff pest controllers - provides a safe habitat for native and endangered wildlife.

They have undertaken a plant survey to acquire a better understanding of native species and work with local schools to give children a better idea of how important it is to help improve wildlife habitat.

The students have helped build nest boxes and plant native trees and shrubs on site. Around 70 rare Kiwi have been introduced, and aviaries have been built to house the rare Takahe, a coot like bird, and the Kakapo, a prehistoric like parrot. In the winter dairy cattle graze the meadow roughs and over a three-month cycle reduce the ground cover. Even the waste paper is recycled into notepads and timber from the forests are used for firewood.

Superintendents in New Zealand enjoy a good degree of autonomy in their role with operational decisions largely made by the superintendent in consultation with the chair of green, referring to the club agronomist and golf course architect when necessary. Green committees are normally only involved in setting goals and a long-term strategies to guide the course management team. The chair of green is often a long-term position, the thinking being that if someone is knowledgeable and competent, why not retain them?