

Dispelling Common Myths: ACSP for Golf Courses

A number of “myths” and misconceptions about the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP) are circulating among the superintendent ranks. The Great Lakes Regional Field Office for Audubon International, based in Elburn, IL, was created to reach out to golf course properties through the superintendents. Their perspective is enormously important to gaining participation. For the short time that we have been calling on golf courses, we have heard some very good stories about what the program is doing for the golf courses, their members and the superintendents’ careers. We have also listened to rumors about the program, that for lack of a better term, we call “myths.” The following is a short list of these common myths along with the correct information in response to each of them.



Textron’s college all-stars learn about the latest in environmental maintenance.



Wetlands can be a glorious hallmark of a golf course in harmony with the environment.



Some jobs are more fun than others . . . but controlled burns are consistent with environmental sensitivity.

Myth #1: Being in the ACSP is too difficult, and it’s too tough to get certified.

It is not difficult, and you may already be taking actions that can lead to certification. Oftentimes, a member looks at the entire certification process instead of simply taking it one step at a time. Focus on fulfilling the Site Assessment and Environmental Plan. When a member gets through that first step, rather than worrying about all of the steps at once, they will be more likely to become invested in the program. I remember my certification process for two golf courses. Once I got through the organizational part of the certification, the rest was easy. I found enthusiastic people who took control and did what we asked them to do. They lent effort and experience to an undertaking that I thought was insurmountable. Bottom line; it got done and we were certified in a one-year period. It was just a matter of proper documentation along with proper volunteerism and delegation!

Myth #2: Our course won’t be able to join or work towards certification; we don’t have the staff, money or time.

Any existing golf course can join and work towards earning the Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary designation. A course doesn’t have to have lots of acreage or habitat to get certified—it just has to practice good environmental management, and we’re here to help. ACSP-certified golf courses range from small nine-hole facilities and lower-budget public courses to country clubs, high-end resorts and PGA facilities. One of the best examples in our area is Pottawatomie Golf Course in St. Charles. This nine-hole facility was certified in 1997. It is a 32-acre golf course property on the Fox River. In fact, it is an early Robert Trent Jones work, built with WPA dollars. Therefore, this golf course has some history that the public enjoys hearing about. This alone makes the ACSP program more valuable because the property already has the public’s interest. Golfers there witness hundreds of purple martins every summer. Their homes are provided by the golf course in wonderful towers of nest boxes mounted in front of the riverscape. Superintendent Denise Gillett-Parchert has upheld the tradition of certification set by Luke Cella, former superintendent. The golf course accepts the flood waters of the Fox River, it hosts many tournaments throughout the season and it embodies a rich tradition of a lowland course next to a woodland setting. If they can do it, so can the rest of us!

Myth #3: We’re not ready to go the distance—i.e., the certification material must be sent in all at once and be perfect in order to get certified.

The ACSP is not like a test and your certification request is not like a paper handed in to be graded. Instead, we work with you to find ways to meet certification guidelines based on the unique strengths and weaknesses of your site. We’re here to help, not create roadblocks. In my case, I picked the things I liked doing first. The momentum carried me through the areas where I was not as

(continued on page 13)

confident. I think they call it a “learning curve” these days.

Myth #4: Due to our golf course policy, there is no way we could ever have children tour our golf course/put up nest boxes/naturalize all our shorelines/etc., so we cannot get certified.

Out of all the Standard Management Practices that Audubon International would like to see on every certified golf course, we know that some may not be applicable to a given situation, especially in the Outreach and Education category. That is why the ACSP is a flexible program. If there are any questions about suggested or required projects, please contact us.

Myth #5: There is no way we will ever be able to afford a new irrigation system/\$40,000 recycling equipment or wash pad/have an aerial photograph taken of the course/etc., so we cannot get certified.

These are a few of the many projects that we have heard people tell us they believe they need to complete to get certified. This is simply not true. Once again, if there are any questions about suggested or required projects, please contact Audubon International. We can also send you a list of the Standard Management Practices that we prefer to see on every golf course.

Myth #6: An environmentally-managed golf course is a brown golf course.

We understand that in order to have a playable course, chemicals will be used—we do not require that you stop these practices outright. Rather, we look to help you manage a playable course with as little chemical input as possible. Working on certification in the ACSP can help you reduce the amount of chemicals needed and reduce the adverse envi-



A Brownie troop visiting a golf course for the first time, enjoying and amazed at how beautiful a putting green really is.

ronmental impact from their use and application (i.e., runoff and water quality). Our most recent *Managed Lands Survey* showed that 82% of responding golf program members are using less pesticides, 92% are using pesticides with lower toxicity levels and 69% are using less water, while at the same time, 99% indicate that playing quality had improved (50%) or at least been maintained (49%) since joining the ACSP. Likewise, 53 members of the ACSP and the Audubon Signature Program were ranked among America’s 100 Greatest Golf Courses by *Golf Digest* in 2004. Twenty-one were certified.

Myth #7: I already have too much to do.

Joining the ACSP and working on certification through onsite projects can be a rewarding experience. Our most recent *Managed Lands Survey* confirmed this fact with 99% of golf superintendents responding that job satisfaction had improved (49%) or at least been maintained (50%) since joining the ACSP. Once again, I remember that my involvement with the ACSP made me feel like part of my hobby was, all of a sudden, part of my job. I actually feel like I avoided “burnout” and extended my career.



At this course, two volunteers do bird box inventory on a weekly basis.

Myth #8: My golfers are the worst golfers in the world/too particular/too uptight/etc., and will never accept the changes I would have to make to become a certified course.

We have many success stories of superintendents and assistants who have successfully educated their membership and golfers on the ACSP. Once golfers understand why certain steps are being taken (i.e., grass is being kept higher around ponds and streams in order to buffer chemical runoff), they are likely to embrace these changes. That is why Outreach and Education is a part of the certification process. Once again, our *Managed Lands Survey* confirms this with superintendents reporting that golfer satisfaction had either improved (66%) or been maintained (34%) since their course joined the ACSP.

Joellen Zeh, program manager for Audubon International, states, “Not a single golf course has gone through certification without making some changes for the better! As we learn more about the golf course and its environment, we make recommendations that enhance habitat, reduce risk, enhance credibility, increase golfer satisfaction, improve playing quality and improve personal and crew job satisfaction.”

I hope these simple “myth-breakers” reduce your fears and encourage you to join Audubon International’s Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses. If there are other “myths” that you need us to address, please let us know at 518-767-9051 or via e-mail at acss@audubonintl.org.



Shoreline repairs for erosion control are very important in conservation of soils.



Sometimes, managing wetlands is an all-new skill set. Education never ends, especially when we buy into environmental obligations.