

The European challenge

Expert says mutually accepted environmental standards needed

By Vern Putney

Ignorance of environmental issues exists in both the camps of golf course developers and environmentalists, according to a United Kingdom-based consultant specializing in "golf ecology."

David Stubbs, managing director of Environmental Golf Services, said: "Arguments have become polarized, but the truth is that golf courses can only benefit the environment if properly planned, developed and managed."

Stubbs said organizations like the Golf Course Wildlife Trust and the proposed European Golf Environment Commission are needed to solve the problem.

"Only when there are widely accepted standards, recognized both by leading environmental organizations and the golf industry, and applied to new projects, can we really

expect to see positive results and an effective counter to the misinformed and blinkered opposition that currently afflicts golf projects," he said.

A member of the Species Survival Commission of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Stubbs said environmental constraints must be identified and addressed at the appraisal stage of a project — before a large investment is committed.

"Until now, this has rarely happened because developers have consistently followed the design-led approach and, at best, paid mere lip service to environmental concerns. Calling for an ecologist at the last minute to resolve unforeseen difficulties is both more costly and a sign of inept project management.

This negative, reactive approach engen-

ders a bad image across the golf development industry," said Stubbs, who has been involved in more than 80 sites in nine European countries and was the first conservation officer of The Golf Course Wildlife Trust.

Doing environmental homework and taking a pro-active attitude will gain developers cost benefits, he said, adding that golf feasibility, commercial viability and the environment are integrally linked.

"Failure to appraise each of these at the right time — that is, from day one — can be the route to ruin."

Stubbs said golf has a poor environmental image in Europe because of "the insensitive approach so often adopted in new development, not because of any inherent incompatibility between golf and the environment."

But, he warned, developers must recog-

nize that some sites are too sensitive, and conservation must outweigh golf in those cases.

He said involving a full mix of professional disciplines on a project team is necessary to change from a fighting, and losing, situation to a cooperative and winning one.

He said experts should consider water supply, storage, treatment and run-off; wildlife; history and archaeology; the landscape, including countryside issues; and access, including public amenity and the project's impact on traffic.

"Better golf courses are cheaper to build and manage because they are site-responsive and involve less planning hassle, while better conservation is achieved because the sites are properly managed," Stubbs said.

Dramatic changes mean developers should 'go slowly,' says Benz

By Vern Putney

Brad Benz has two words of caution for those in the golf course business eyeing Europe as a fertile field for expansion and profit. "Go slowly."

"Things are changing dramatically overseas," said the Los Gatos, Calif., U.S., golf course architect, who has been involved the past five years with projects in Europe. "As in America, the economy is shaky. In addition, environmental laws are particularly harsh in many countries."

Southern Europe, Benz said, is tourist-oriented. He estimates that industry has declined 80 percent. "Without the visitors, there aren't enough natives golf-inclined or sufficiently prosperous to support courses."

Benz cited recent experiences in the south of Spain, where he has a course under construction and two ready for launch. "Of 27

'Environmental laws are particularly harsh in many countries.'

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projects reported in the works, few got off the ground."

Europeans, he noted, have a different attitude toward sports than do Americans. Rather than pursue a recreation outlet such as golf zealously, they tend to enjoy multiple recreation activities.

Europe, as a whole, has a strong agricultural bent, is fiercely protective of land use and insistent upon preservation of acreage character. The preservation of a rural landscape character is of paramount importance. Golf courses are perceived to be "urban intrusions."

Planning authorities don't take kindly to those who profess to be golf course architects, haven't a clue about ecology-sensitive and minimal land manipulation and the classic values of golf course architectural design and, in the process, despoil terrain. A few such experiences have soured the market for "foreign" interests.

Employing European developers frequently is more practical, he said. "In any price bidding, they usually have the edge," Benz conceded.

Surprises await the American golf course architect that will supremely tax his resourcefulness. Europeans are very respectful of traditional ways of golf course design, construction, maintenance and facility management.

In America, for example, some golf courses use a million gallons of water a day for irrigation. Treasured water in Europe can be re-

stricted to 150 cubic meters a day (40,000 gallons) for the same purpose. That quantity is barely sufficient to irrigate greens and tees only. The balance of the golf course must rely upon what Nature provides. In drought years, the consequences are serious, Benz said.

Crashing or developing golf course markets in European countries can be like carrying a tee shot over 250 yards of pond. One might as well whistle Dixie as try to plant a construction foot in the yodeling territory of Switzerland. And Austria remains more inclined to ski slopes than the gentle swings popular in U.S. golf architecture, he said.

Germany's regulations can be formidable. England's edicts are difficult, but there is ample room for discussion "if their rules are followed," Benz observed.

Benz is a speaker at Golf Course Europe's conference, Oct. 7-9 at Wiesbaden, Germany.

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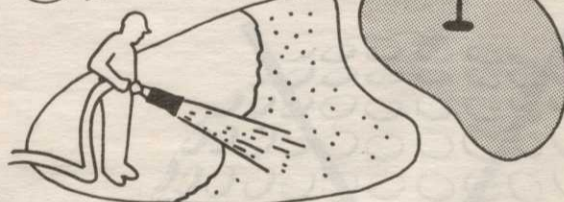
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