

Anti-golf activists deplore the impact of golf in Asia

By ANDREW OVERBECK

As I study the growth of golf in Asia in the coming year, I will interview hundreds of golf course managers, developers, and course designers to discuss with them the challenges of building and operating golf courses in this part of the world. However, in my pre-departure research, I came across two Asia-based anti-golf course movements: the Global Network for Anti-Golf Course Action (GNAGA) and the umbrella organization, the Global Anti-Golf Movement (GAGM).

My curiosity peaked and I arranged to meet with Gen Morita, the International Coordinator for GNAGA in Tokyo, and a GAGM member (who wished to remain anonymous) in Bangkok. I discovered that their ideological stance against golf was not only difficult to swallow, but also

Andrew Overbeck is currently on a Watson Fellowship studying the growth of golf in Asia and will be regularly contributing to GCN. He will be visiting both existing golf courses and those under construction in Thailand, China, and Vietnam.



proved to be a rude introduction to golf in Asia. In their minds, Jack Nicklaus is not a world class golfer and course designer—he is the devil incarnate.

The two movements didn't come together until the early 90's, well after the initial golf course boom in many Asian countries. Even then, they were only a loose network of environmentalists and academics that sought to heighten public awareness concerning the dangers of golf course developments.

Since 1993, they have sponsored a "World No Golf Day" every April the 29th, and have produced yearly "updates" that chronicle the efforts of anti-golf efforts worldwide. In addition, they have petitioned governments to suspend further support for golf course developments and they have hounded developers in an attempt to disrupt projects. For example, GAGM has petitioned the European Commission to stop endorsing the European Golf Association's Ecology Unit, the International Olympic Committee to keep golf out of the Olympic Games, and the government of Burma to end their pro-golf "Visit Burma Year" campaign.

GNAGA has been even more proactive, seeking to block the development of a golf course in South Kona, Hawaii, with a lawsuit. The beguiling activists bought stock in Japan Airlines (JAL), which is financing the course, and are in turn suing JAL on the ground that their investment is not in the best interest of the company and its stockholders. These organizations utilize grassroots organizing, political lobbying, and sophisticated legal tactics in order to accomplish their goals.

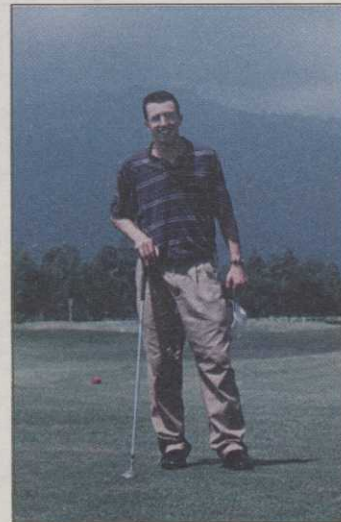
Their opposition to golf course developments is multi-faceted, citing many cultural, social, economic, and environmental factors. According to the anti-golf movement, golfers represent "mass" tourists on the "Tourist Activity Continuum," a chart that groups tourists into distinct categories based on their level of interaction with local populations. According to this definition, golfers typically desire very little

cultural authenticity since all of their time is spent on the golf course and around resort developments. Further, activists allege that when these bands of evil golfers emerge from their dens of sin and destruction (golf courses) they often engage in "hedonistic, selfish and disrespectful behavior," thus damaging the social structure of communities. If you think these claims are outlandish, read on.

The anti-golf movement is extremely adamant about environmental destruction. They contend that golf courses disrupt the natural environment by reshaping landscapes and polluting fragile eco-systems. They also accuse golf course developers of tampering with local water supplies—either illegally drawing water and depleting local supplies or flooding agricultural fields with course runoff.

Meanwhile, the activists claim that golf course developments involve huge "land grabs" which in many cases have been sponsored by national governments. This

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Overbeck on location in Thailand

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Cart-path rule

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far away," said Andre, who advised the county that his agency was "taking steps" to refer the matter back to the Department of Justice for action.

Jim Collins, Boone County administrator, said: "They [National Park Service] did not want to hear any of our arguments. No appeals were allowed. The course is at the end of its fourth year and we have reports from the dean of the University [Kentucky] ag school and from the University of Georgia that cart traffic could damage the course. We were looking at

five to seven years [to allow the turf to mature].

"We have two courses in the county," he continued, "The older course allows golfers to go off the cart paths. Both the ADA Resource Center and the Department of Justice said that this accommodation was under the letter and spirit of the law."

In a mid-October conversation with Boone County attorney Larry Crigler, he advised that, "The matter is probably going to be settled. The course will close for the year in two weeks and the course will be made accessible to Mr. Duckworth when it re-

opens in April 1998." He went on to explain that the date of compliance, 1999, originally stated by the county, was a "typographical error."

Duckworth feels his cause has finally been vindicated. "I went to the papers with all the correspondence," he said, "and I think that, and the fact that it is an election year coming up, along with the threat of action by the Justice Department is what got the county to agree." He is skeptical about the typographical error.

Jones is happy with the outcome as well. "We are not in business to promote the handicapped," he noted. "We promote the game, and are advocates for full inclusion of everyone who wants to play golf."

SPOTLIGHT ON ASIA

Activists

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reclamation of land has uprooted farming families and caused them to leave their lands in search of new economic viability. In addition, they argue that in the long term, golf course developments result in negative job growth.



They insist that the tourism industry is an unsustainable form of economic development, since the cyclical nature of the industry results in an unstable local employment market. The list of objections could continue for pages—from labeling tourism promoters neocolonialists to alleging that female caddies suffer degradation and abuse on the golf course.

As you might have guessed, GAG'M and GNAGA are declaring victory in the recent lapse of the golf course industry in much of Asia, including Japan and Thailand. However, the activists admit that the recent economic downturn in Asia has had more

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While this may mean bad news for perspective developers and the existing golf courses, it also means that the anti-golf activists have for the most part ceased operations since they sense no impending crisis. It is their belief that Asian economies have no more room left for golf development.

Certainly, the issues surrounding golf course development in Asia are already extremely complex, and GAG'M and GNAGA seek to add to this complexity.

While there may be certain elements of truth in their arguments, their rigid ideology does not allow for compromise—so their arguments get lost amongst their rhetoric of hysteria and misinformation. Following these discussions, I began to have nightmares that the courses I was planning to visit were being taken over by pitchfork wielding farmers seeking to reverse economic injustice.

Fortunately, after a mind-cleansing visit to a local Bangkok driving range, I was once again able to dream of lush Asian courses in natural surroundings.

Canadian participation

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1990] their participation rate has remained flat at 15% and is heavily skewed toward higher income families.

The survey reveals, however, that Western Canada, which has long established junior programs, enjoys extremely strong participation among 12 - 17 year olds, with the Prairie provinces showing a 28% participation rate and British Columbia 21%.

"The game and the overall [Canadian] industry has enjoyed a solid participation rate over the past seven years," says MacDonald. "Our challenge now is to increase the [current] 19% rate to 20% or 25% by creating national junior golf development programs that are accessible and affordable like the RCGA's Future Links. Without programs to introduce and keep people in the game, the industry will have trouble maintaining or increasing what it has right now."

Among other findings in the 1996 *Golf Participation in Canada Survey* report:

- Annual rounds played in Canada increased between 1990 and 1996 about 26% from 53 million to 67.3 million. *In the U.S. over the same period, they've remained level at about 480 million a year.*
- Canadian golfers average 14 rounds per year ... *as compared to 19.3 for U.S. golfers.*
- 347,000 Canadians started playing golf in 1996 ... *vs. 2 million in the U.S.*

The RCGA, the governing body of men's amateur golf in Canada, determines national policies and standards relating to the game on behalf of its more than 235,000 members.

Copies of the report can be purchased through the RCGA's membership development department at 905-849-9700.

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