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## AI UNDER THE BUS

I was shivering in my frosty little office, blithely screwing around in social-media dreamland when I saw a Tweet from a well-known “environmental” superintendent saying, “What did everyone think about the Golfweek article about Audubon International?” Well, since I haven’t read (or even seen) a print copy of Golfweek since the Clinton administration, I clicked on the story link to see what he was referencing.

That’s when I stopped feeling chilly because my blood started to boil.

In “Going for the Green: Special Report,” freelance contributor Bruce Selcraig uses 2,000-plus words to smear, impugn, blacken and otherwise discredit Audubon International as a sham. The article asserts, quite directly, that AI is a jacked-up PR program that simply leverages name confusion with the National Audubon Society for nefarious purposes and, perhaps, the enrichment of AI founder Ron Dodson and others.

Pissed off yet? Here are a few juicy morsels from Selcraig’s “expose”:

- “The name confusion persists because Audubon International, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, fosters the mistaken identity.”

- “The faux Audubon mystique clearly has aided Audubon International’s efforts to build membership and gain corporate funding while also giving the golf industry a marketing bonanza.”

- “Dodson might never change his organization’s name, simply because the strategic confusion with Big Audubon has worked so well.”

- “Course owners need to realize there is a difference between feel-good green marketing and becoming true stewards of their land.”

To his credit, Selcraig did include quotes from Dodson, Dr. Kim Erusha

of the USGA Green Section, Jeff Bollig of GCSAA and Environmental Leadership Award winner David Phipps who all defended the program and made it clear that the vast majority of folks on our side of the business understand the difference between AI and NAS.

Here’s what I know about this whole thing based on 25 years of participating in and writing about the whole golf/environment thing:

- Nearly two decades ago, Ron Dodson proved in court that *no one* owns exclusive rights to the name “Audubon.” Duh! Of course NAS dis-

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likes AI! They were whipped in a lawsuit by Dodson and, more importantly, they resent every dollar of support that goes to AI instead of them. NAS doesn’t care a whit about golf course turf... but they care deeply about their fundraising turf.

- In my direct, personal experience, Dodson and everyone else at AI has gone out of their way to clarify the distinction between the two organizations. Requiring AI to put a statement on their website “disclosing” that they aren’t NAS – as Selcraig seems to demand – is like requiring little Pine Valley GC in Simcoe, Canada to reveal to potential players that it isn’t “that” Pine Valley.

- Sure, the Cooperative Sanctuary program has only directly touched a small percentage of courses, but the concept has been a catalyst to help change practices at thousands of facilities. Ron Dodson has been the band leader; not everyone plays an instrument but plenty of folks sing along.

- The implication that most courses just pay \$200 to join and then simply use the AI membership as a shield against criticism is utter bunk. Sure, some facilities join and never do anything because fixes can be expensive and time-consuming, but the majority take it seriously and work hard at it. The bottom line of AI is that you get out of it what you put into it. They’ve never claimed any differently.

- The suggestion that AI membership is a big selling factor for rounds or memberships is also bull. People choose where they want to play because they

like the course. Things like the facility’s environmental track record have little, if any, impact on that decision.

- Finally, I’ve known Ron Dodson for more than 20 years. He’s honest, passionate, brilliant and engaging. If he wanted to get rich, he chose an incredibly poor career path.

I really wonder why Golfweek chose to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of AI by dredging up the ancient name question. Instead of saying that AI is a small organization that has accomplished a lot but not as much as they or the golf industry had hoped, they marginalize all the good things that have been done. That sucks.

All I know for sure is Golfweek went to great lengths to throw AI under the bus. I talked to Ron about the story the other day and, predictably, he didn’t care. He was too busy trying to figure out how to make the bus run cleaner than to give a damn why some naysayers had tossed him beneath it in the first place. **GCI**