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## ECOLOGICAL LITERACY

In 1944, noted conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote: “Acts of conservation without the requisite desires and skill are futile. To create these desires and skills, and the community motive, is the task of education.”

In January 2003, the National Science Foundation released a report of its Advisory Committee for Environmental Research and Education that found “in the coming decades, the public will more frequently be called upon to understand complex environmental issues, assess risk, evaluate proposed environmental plans and understand how individual decisions affect the environment at local and global scales.” The committee called for the creation of a scientifically informed citizenry and pointed out that this will require a “concerted and systematic approach to environmental education grounded in a broad and deep research base that offers a compelling invitation to lifelong learning.”

Now, nearly a decade after that report and 70 years after Leopold’s statement, the question is: “Is the public any more ecologically literate than they were 70 years ago?” To my way of thinking the answer is a resounding “No.” This is not only a sad state of affairs, but it is dangerous to our future and, of course, to the future of golf.

In the course of a lifetime, an individual will accumulate environmental knowledge from a combination of school, the media, personal reading, family members and friends, outdoor activities, entertainment outlets, and a wide range of other professional and personal experiences. For a few motivated individuals, this can eventually add up to an accomplished environmental literacy. But for most Americans, it falls far short. Most people accumulate a diverse and unconnected smattering of factoids, a few – sometimes totally incorrect

– principles, numerous opinions, and very little real understanding. Research shows that most Americans believe they know more about the environment than they actually do.

That is why 45 million Americans believe the ocean is a source of fresh water; 120 million believe spray cans still have CFCs in them even though CFCs were banned in 1978; another 120 million people believe disposable diapers are the leading problem with landfills when they actually represent about 1 percent of the problem; and

often soul-soothing, outdoor play. The age-old pattern of children spending hours roaming and playing outside is close to extinct due to a combination of electronics, cyberspace, and parental efforts to keep their children indoors and, in their minds, safer.

While the simplest forms of environmental knowledge are widespread, public comprehension of more complex environmental subjects is very limited. The average American, regardless of age, income or education, mostly fails to grasp essential aspects

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130 million believe hydropower is America’s top energy source, when it accounts for just 10 percent of the total. It is also why very few people understand the leading causes of air and water pollution or how they should be addressed. Years of data from Roper surveys show a persistent pattern of environmental ignorance even among the most educated and influential members of society. And an unknown number of people – some playing golf on your golf course – believe golf courses are nothing more than manicured hazardous waste sites.

A more recent and disturbing phenomenon also warrant careful attention. It is perhaps best described in a book by family expert and author Richard Louv (2005) as widespread “nature-deficit disorder.” Louv is among a growing number of analysts who see unprecedented pattern changes in how young people relate to nature and the outdoors. As kids become more “wired” than ever before, they are drawn away from healthful,

of environmental science, important cause/effect relationships, or even basic concepts such as runoff pollution, power generation and fuel use, or water flow patterns. For example:

- About 80 percent of Americans are heavily influenced by incorrect or outdated environmental myths; and
- Just 12 percent of Americans can pass a basic quiz on awareness of energy topics.

For golf course managers, this sad state of affairs is an opportunity. The opportunity rests with the need for course managers to “talk the talk” of conservation and environmental management, not just walk the walk. The bottom line is the average American is dumb as a rock when it comes to conservation and environmental management. They generally don’t know the difference between bentgrass and moss. It is in the best interest of golf and golf course managers to establish and implement an education approach aimed at raising the ecological literacy of your patrons. **GCI**