

Up to the *Challenge*

The new Audubon International CEO is ready to take on the group's evolving mission.

Impossibly young. That was my first thought when I met Ryan Aylesworth in person last year. But, he seems to be used to that response and he quickly showed me that appearances can be deceiving.

Here's a guy who, before taking over leadership of Audubon International last June, had a big job with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service working as a liaison with federal and state government agencies and dealing with a myriad of public affairs issues. He holds degrees in conservation-related sciences from UMass and Cornell and he's in the process of earning a doctoral degree in natural resources science and management from the University of Minnesota. Most importantly, Aylesworth has spent his life outdoors – fishing, hunting and, yes, golfing. To put it bluntly, he speaks turf pretty well.

Now Aylesworth will lead one of game's most important organizations as it changes along with the evolution of both the sport and business of golf. We caught up with him as part of this month's focus on sustainability.



Describe your first 10 months at the helm of AI in one word...

Energizing. It really is exciting to come to work every day and do this kind of work. It's easy to get cynical in today's world but this organization tries to do good things for the right reasons. It's inspirational.

Is this what you thought you'd be doing when you were a kid?

I wish I could say that I knew when I was 10 years old I'd be doing this. I grew up in a very rural area of northwest Maine going hunting and fishing and skiing and snowshoeing. My family owned a fly-fishing business and my dad was the high school science teacher in a small, small school. I actually had my dad as a teacher for eight classes!

Oh, I feel your pain! I had my mom as an English teacher and it was brutal.

I hope she likes your journalistic writing style! Anyway, I thought about a variety of career paths but I knew early on that con-

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servation and resource management was right for me. I wanted to be a field biologist or wildlife manager and be outside. It never occurred to me that a career in this field would require going to as many meetings, managing people, and all the other “office” stuff that comes along with it.

But, I learned pretty quickly during my undergrad training that so many policies and decisions are made by non-scientists, and, frankly, without considerable input from scientists. I got excited about using my technical knowledge to help inform the decision-making process. So, I sort of took

one for the team in terms of getting to be outside and moved more into administration and leadership.

Miss it?

There are plenty of days I yearn a little just to be a field guy! I have a pointer and get out frequently to hunt upland birds in the fall and winter, and I still get to go fishing when I'm visiting my father or friends up north. There's no better feeling than being on the bank of a river trying to match the hatch. You're in Earth's church. It's a primal experience.

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The Syngenta Business Institute has enhanced the communication with my staff. I've been able to increase their understanding of our course standards. I also learned how to give effective feedback to my crew by using four simple steps called DASR: Describe, Acknowledge, Specify and Reaffirm.

My employees and I have a better understanding of what I want and expect, while improving the morale of the crew. It validates the employees' importance to the operation and sets a standard for future operations. This also provides a team atmosphere, with everyone knowing what's expected and the consequences if standards are not met.

The format was great; the length of the course was just right. I would definitely recommend this course to other superintendents, no matter what their level of experience, who want to gain knowledge in how to manage their crew more efficiently.



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Q&A

What's been the biggest pleasant surprise about AI thus far?

I'm really excited about how mission-driven the staff is. There were a few people along the way in my experience in government who were like that, but that mission-driven spirit tends to get beaten out of folks over the course of a long career in public service. It was a really pleasant surprise to see how engaged and connected this crew is, especially the folks who have been with us for 15 or more years. It's really refreshing to work with people who are often putting their personal best interests in the background to do more for the organization and our members.

I've hired three new staff since coming on board and the combination of these folks with long-tenured staff like Joellen, Nancy and Fred has been amazing. It's a really positive dynamic.



Check out the GCI app edition for our exclusive video interview with Ryan Aylesworth, president and CEO of Audubon International, to learn how superintendents can get the most out of their memberships and where the organization is going in the next few years. Also, he outlines how to talk about the environmental benefits of golf in your community for our Superintendent Radio Network podcast.

What's been less pleasant?

I've been a little surprised at how some non-members (facilities) still haven't bought into the program. There's something still psychologically daunting about spending the money to become a member of our program – even though it will pay for itself many times over in terms of cost savings and other fiscal benefits. It's not a negative – just a challenge to keep educating people.

How much did you know about golf before you signed on?

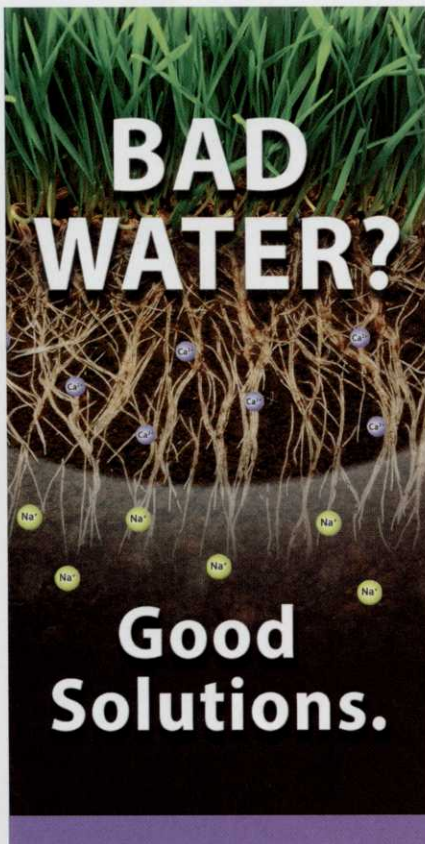
I started golfing when I was a kid. I went to the driving range with my grandfather and played as a teen. We actually helped start the first golf team at my high school and I worked a couple of summers helping manage a course and even taught some youth lessons. I knew that the (superintendent's) job was more complicated than what most people thought. But I also understood that supers have this land-based ethic...kind of like farmers. They understand stewardship.

What does AI mean to superintendents?

As I've interacted with them over the past 10 months, the number of people who have told me that the program has changed their life has blown me away. They've said that the values they've learned from AI are things that have molded them personally and that they've passed along to their kids. That's the magic of what AI has done and continues to do.

Dig down on that a little...

Too often, in society, there's the "Us vs. Them." It's "the economy vs. the environment." There's this notion that you can't be a good steward and be a good businessman. I've talked to a lot of members who initially thought



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getting certified was going to be a bunch of paperwork and bureaucracy and would take too much time and money. But, after working with our people, they’ve realized that it’s not like that. Instead, they see cost savings and direct improvement to their operations, but they also know they’re safeguarding the environment and being a better role model for the entire community. It’s changed how they perceive their role in society. That’s even trickled down to their kids, the people that work for them, etc. It’s had an impact on them far beyond their daily job.

Let’s talk about a dirty word...greenwashing. A few critics have said AI is just a PR program to help courses sell themselves as eco-friendly.

There a lot of entities out there that will say, “We’ll help you brand yourselves as ‘green.’” No planning, no education, no implementation support, no verification...just a rubber-stamped certification or a logo. What we’ve done is just the opposite. We’re an environmental organization that uses certification and education to promote good outcomes. We are not the sustainability arm of golf.

It’s a myopic view for other environmental groups to criticize us for “collaborating with evildoers.” Our position is that you’re going to make far less headway by suing to create change than by exploring the issues, finding a pragmatic path forward and creating incentives to do things sustainably. That’s what’s so exciting. With others, it’s about using sticks. We try to use carrots.

Yet there are facilities that join and don’t ever do much.

The claim that once a member pays their dues they can call themselves “certified” and start using our logo to prove that they’re a good steward is patently false. Our program does not allow a member to become certified until their operation has been carefully evaluated

and verified – typically with site visits – using explicit criteria and standards. That said, a lot of courses will join and then put certification on their “to do” list in a drawer for a while. But they can’t market themselves as a certified member until they actually complete the steps.

Is being “green” that big of a deal from a facility’s marketing standpoint?

Absolutely, but cost reduction and good stewardship matter to a facility even if being “green” doesn’t. I don’t disagree that a relatively small percentage of golfers think today about the environmental management practices at the courses they join or play at. But, the demographics of golfers are changing rapidly. There is going to be a major transition in terms of why people golf and why they golf where they golf. We see this in the growing market for “green” lodgings. We already see people in that market actively seeking out environmentally responsible hotels and resorts. I do think it’s going to grow. Courses need to think about the long term when it comes to consumer demand.

How do you feel about the whole “brown is beautiful” thing?

I’m not ready to say that lack of green means something is wrong, but green doesn’t necessarily mean too many inputs, etc. Let’s not focus on color or “greenness.” The larger point is that there are ways to achieve green that are less input intensive.

When I applied for this job I said very candidly that we should focus as much on communicating the economic benefits of sustainability as we do the ecological benefits. We need to make it very clear that this is about economics and social values and the environmental and socioeconomic objectives need not be mutually exclusive. In some cases, the ethical “it’s just the right thing to do” argument is very important and enough



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to get people to act. But, the potential for a facility to simultaneously achieve economic, social and environmental goals through certification is a pretty compelling message.

Put on your "outsider" hat...what do you still think we need to improve on?

Education, education, education... Don't let the vocal minority at your club rule when it comes to conditioning. Talk to your members, explain how enhanced management practices will maintain – or even improve – the playability of the course while improving aesthetics and protecting wildlife and other natural resources.

As an organization, we are committed to helping superintendents feel empowered and

comfortable in communicating their work to the public.

When we do this interview again in five years, what will the headline be about how AI and Ryan Aylesworth have evolved?

I hope we'll be able to say we moved through this crossroads and we took this transition as an opportunity to improve and get better.

We didn't ignore the challenges. Instead, we embraced them and left it all on the field. We worked passionately with our dedicated membership to ensure that the waters and landscapes inherited by future generations are as – or more – healthy than the ones we manage today. GCI

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