



Communication is key



When it comes to wildlife, the staff at The Sanctuary knows it can't isolate the club.

By Katie Tuttle

Located on Sanibel Island in Florida, The Sanctuary Golf Club is surrounded by acres of wildlife preserve. Because of this, environmental impact is always a concern to the course, as well as the community. In an effort to educate the community on the positive impact golf courses can have on the environment, The Sanctuary has focused their efforts on three separate areas.

GATOR BEACHES. When the course planted all of the lake banks with vegetation to create a buffer between the course turf and the water, they realized the construction eliminated the area where alligators often lay to sun. As a result, the alligators came farther out of the water to lay on the course, often interfering with the golfers. Around the same time, the island community was taking the stance that alligators could be removed from the island. This stemmed from the fact that in the past 12 years, there had been two deaths caused by alligators.

The Sanctuary's superintendent, Kyle Sweet, and his staff questioned this mentality. In the hopes of educating the community, they brought in Dr. Kent Vliet of the University Of Florida's biology department and hosted an event about alligators on the course. When they took Dr. Vliet onto the course for a tour, one of the first comments he made was, "What about creating some areas where you'd like the alligators to go, so they'll be away from the golfers? It would be better for the golfers and better for the gators."

And thus the idea of the Gator Beaches was born.

Sweet and his team created two areas on the course that took up 20 feet of land from the water's edge. Without changing the lake edge at all, they created easy-access beaches, bordered by dead palm logs to deter the alligators from climbing over and lying on the turf. Now, the alligators are

Construction on one of the gator beaches, that provided a place on the course just for the alligators, keeping them separate from the golfers and visitors to the course.



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able to be out of the water and the golfers are able to play their rounds of golf; neither disrupts the other.

And it's not just alligators that take advantage of the areas.

"We have actually had nesting killdeer," Sweet says. "They've actually nested in there ever since we put it in. So you've got a killdeer nesting there, and then a big alligator just a few feet away."

One of the Gator Beaches is visible from the 17th green. Sweet says that when it was first constructed, he made sure people knew it wasn't going to be pretty. It was going to serve its purpose, even if it wasn't appealing to the eyes. Still, he was worried people might see it as more of an eyesore.

"I have heard no single complaint about that area," he says. "Because they understand what it's all about. It's been embraced and encouraged. People here get it, and that's not always the case."

With the positive response to the beaches, groups on Sanibel are now looking at the idea of adding similar beaches to the community. Curious people have contacted Sanibel-Captiva Land and Wildlife Conservation, which has directed them to

Sweet and The Sanctuary.

"Wait a minute, I'm going to go to a golf course and see what they're doing to help manage their wildlife?" Sweet says was the typical response. After a tour of the course, the community members are impressed. "It's really good to get feedback from the community like that," Sweet adds. "Plus it's always nice to take them on the course and show them."

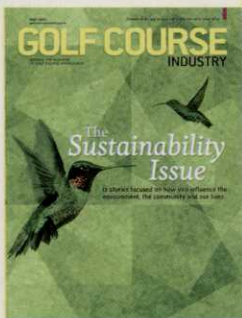
WILDLIFE EXPLORERS. The adults on Sanibel aren't the only community members The Sanctuary is trying to educate. Over spring and Christmas break, the course offers a program called Wildlife Explorers for children and grandchildren of club members. The children are taken to the driving range, the tennis center, and the swimming pool.

Sweet decided he wanted to take that to the next level. "We've been Audubon certified for 10 years and I was trying to figure out a way to get kids on the golf course," he says. "To somehow involve kids with what we do here, and this thing fell in my lap. It was just like 'maybe we can take the kids out on a golf course tour' and it evolved."

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– Kyle Sweet,
The Sanctuary Golf Club

The course has been putting on these tours for kids for two or three years now and it has become a common part of The Sanctuary.

“We take the kids and we have these six-seater golf carts and we travel onto the golf course,” he says. “We take a board and [glue] on 24 or 25 [pictures of] animals that we normally would see on the golf course at any given time. Then we go onto the course and look for them.”

They almost always find at least 50 percent of the animals on the board during the time they’re out there, Sweet says.

“While we’re out there we may talk a little bit about environmental things, like water quality,” he says. “We may talk about mowing the grass; we may talk about pollinators, bees, butterflies and birds. It’s really kind of focusing in on the opportunity to take these kids and show them one more thing, one thing with them outside the norm. It’s just education; it’s exposure.”

Every course should try to offer a similar opportunity. “I’ve talked to people and they’re like ‘Oh, my members would just have a fit if I took a bunch of kids out there



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Sweet: "We take a board and [glue] on 24 or 25 [pictures of] animals that we normally would see on the golf course at any given time."

riding on the golf course' and I say 'Well you're just not communicating it right. You need to let them know that it's important that you bring those kids out there on the golf course.'"

"I just don't think people communicate enough," he says. "I make it a point to make sure they know that this is something that's important for us to do as a club."

WILDLIFE BROCHURES. If these two projects make you wonder what The Sanctuary scenery looks like, Sweet has an answer for that too.

The Sanctuary likes to have booklets on hand to give to visitors to the course, highlighting the local wildlife. Last year the course decided to upgrade their wildlife booklets to create more of a formal, coffee table brochure approach. An employee went online and found stock photos of wildlife that could be found on the golf course. However, when Sweet looked at it, he wasn't pleased.

"Everything seemed to look different," he says. "This doesn't look like what we have. A warbler up in Cleveland, the photo is going to be different. They don't look the same; not like a warbler down here."

So Sweet and his 18-year-old son started taking his camera around whenever they were on the course. They collected dozens of animal and scenery images, continuously building their collection. Then they worked with an Atlanta company to create a layout for the brochure, which has now been distributed to people all over Sanibel, as well as mailed all over the country.

"It shows people that these are the things that you might see and it gets people interested in actually going and looking for them," Sweet says. "It's our wildlife. It's great because people can understand that that wildlife exists right here. We are a high-end maintenance course but we have this wildlife opportunity here because we're right beside a national wildlife refuge and we recognize it and we do our best to protect it; to manage for it if we can."

Every visitor to the course gets a booklet, and often he will have people tell him that, while they don't have their own copy, they've seen it at someone else's house, Sweet says.

"It's been a great outreach tool." GCI

Katie Tuttle is GCI's assistant editor.