

Golf AND Ecology :

A RESPONSIBILITY AND AN OPPORTUNITY FOR AMERICA'S COUNTRY CLUBS



**Highlights of an address by John Fry,
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Magazines, to the National Club Assn.'s
annual meeting, London, England**

This address by John Fry is an outgrowth of two articles, "Golf: America's Vanishing Green Belt" (GOLF Magazine, October, 1970, p. 35) and "The Vanishing Urban Course" (GOLFDOM, September, 1970, p. 36), both of which traced the demise of the urban golf course and called for a recognition of the role a golf course can play as a green belt in the ecology of an urban center.

Although the amount of land in the actual hands of golf clubs is not particularly large, compared to the Redwood forests of California or the great Southwest desert, many of these courses are priceless islands of turf, trees and animal life in the midst of, or standing in the way of, what up until recently we have liked to call progress. One golf course in a suburb of Westchester or Chicago or Los Angeles can be infinitely more valuable than 20,000 acres of Forever Wilderness land, not only in dollar terms, but more important, in terms of thousands of people affected by the use of that land.

There is, of course, great pressure to sell bearing down on many private clubs and commercially-operated semi-private and public courses. Adding to these pressures is the mounting tax load on many clubs. Suddenly a community wakes up to the fact that the pleasant expanse of green in its midst, that was the country club, has been sold off to the developers of an industrial park or of mass housing. The officialdom which failed originally to see the long range value of such green belt areas is too bankrupt to buy up a natural resource which it helped to tax out of existence.

Each of us as individual citizens has a responsibility for the wise use of the land around us. We especially have a responsibility—a unique trust—when we own that land. Until you change your thinking about land so that it no longer merely is a capital item on your club's book, a business transaction on the way to some future land speculation—you don't deserve to receive, let alone ask for, favorable tax treatment from the rest of the non-golfing public.

What is needed is to change the attitudes of our members—particularly the governing bodies of clubs. And when they have adopted new attitudes—new values about the ecology of golf course land—they can become crusaders in the communities in which they live. Finally, when communities themselves alter their sense of value about surrounding golf course land, you're going to be able to talk to them intelligently about taxation.

Golf courses do provide a relief from the unrelieved, continuous sprawl of housing, industry and highway.

Therefore golfers and government at all levels, through taxation and zoning, have a responsibility to see that such land is conserved as open space. Even if the land is not necessarily conserved for golf.

In the next few years the land use issue is going to bring about some very fundamental rethinking of some very sacred cows in American political and social thinking—in, for instance, our traditional reliance on dollar values to measure our progress and the quality of our existence in America.

But perhaps the most interesting thing about the current debate over ecology is that the needs of sound ecology are very frequently in direct conflict with traditional American ideas about populism. The Sierra Club is a very undemocratic organization, because it is telling us that it is more important for six dozen backpackers to enjoy walking through the High Sierra at Mineral King than it is to open the land to a million Californians. Golf land, too, falls in a special privileged classification and will always be discriminatory in a sense, because a large amount of valuable land is able to accommodate a relatively small number of people at a given time. But ecology tells us, rightly, that the preservation of open land without intensive use applied to it can be a good thing. In many cases, however, it is going to run counter to traditional American populism—for instance our ideas about privilege and property.

"We need nature as much in the city as in the countryside. In order to endure we must maintain the bounty of that great cornucopia which is our inheritance."

—Ian McHarg

I am certainly not going to make a case here for the ecological benefits of open golf space out-weighting the civil rights considerations inherent in membership discrimination by country clubs. But in the next few years it is going to be difficult to sweep this issue under the rug, because every time the special property status of golf courses comes up at the Federal and state levels, the issue is going to arise. Let me just say that if golf were not saddled with the discrimination issue, the political swimming would be a whole lot easier for clubs than it's going to be.

Some time this year, Senator Edmund Muskie is going to conduct Congressional hearings on property tax reform. I urge you to start thinking right away about this opportunity to present golf's case at the level of a national forum. It will require study and documentation, but I hope the opportunity will not go begging. □

Reprints of the article from GOLF Magazine were sent to House, Senate and Cabinet officials, golf writers, ecological and other publications and to mayors of major United States cities.