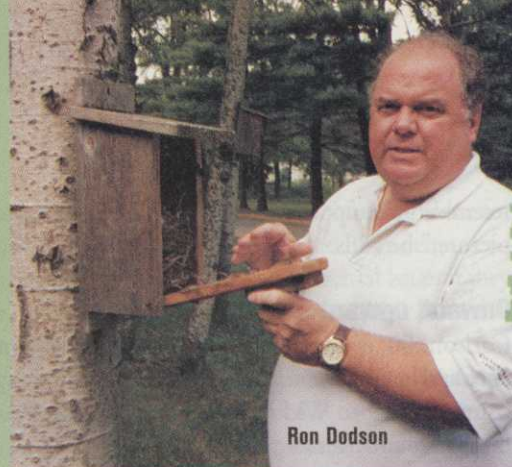


*Inside Golf's*

# Audubon Program



Ron Dodson





# Undaunted by criticism and misconceptions, Ron Dodson pioneers and expands a program to forge a sometimes uneasy alliance between golf and the environment

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MIKE PERRAULT, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

ENVIRONMENTALIST RON DODSON has long endured critics' pot shots at both himself and his nearly decade-old Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses.

"There are people who think we're getting filthy rich off the program," says Dodson, president and CEO of Selkirk, N.Y.-based Audubon International, a small, non-profit organization in no way affiliated with the 1.5-million-member National Audubon Society. "Others say I'm a crook, a fake, that I'm sleeping with the enemy."

"The truth is, I get paid about half as much as my counterparts (CEOs of environmental non-profits)," Dodson counters, adding that less than 10 percent of Audubon International's nearly \$900,000 in revenues last year were used to cover administrative costs. He bristles at environmentalists' accusations that he has "sold out" to the golf industry, confident in his belief that partnering with individuals and organizations to improve the environment is more effective than confronting them.

Surprisingly, the program that partners superintendents and Audubon International was created after a New York superintendent merely sought environmentally friendly management advice to cope with unruly skunks on his course. But in the years since, the program's evolution and impact have dramatically altered the perceptions that many superintendents, golfers, the general public and even staunch environmentalists have about the delicate link between golf and nature.

## Man on a mission

Dodson found his calling and founded Audubon International almost out of desperation. In 1987, he was laid off as regional vice president of National Audubon Society's New England territory, along with more than two dozen other employees who were victims of budget cuts. Dodson wagered his personal savings and used two environmental consulting contracts as collateral for a bank loan to reconstitute the defunct Audubon

Society of New York State, later creating the subsidiary Audubon International.

For a time, Dodson's move was mired in controversy, as the National Audubon Society responded with a lawsuit claiming he inappropriately used the Audubon name. But a judge admonished the two environmental groups, noting that "birds of a feather" should work together. Dodson won the right to use the name.

Backed by all-important financial and moral support from USGA, Dodson began the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses with hopes of enticing 100 course members in the inaugural year. When 150 joined, he and USGA officials felt they were on the right track.

## A new, positive spin

Dodson's cooperative approach and certification methodology rub some environmentalists the wrong way, but those who know the former high school biology teacher say he has

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◀ One Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program member hauled a carved tree (left) from Canada to Audubon International's New York headquarters as a gift.



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always had a tendency "to break out of the box."

Ted Horton, vice president of natural resources for the Pebble Beach Co., applauds Audubon International's cooperative approach, noting it has been "very forward in its thinking as an environmental group — ahead of everyone else — building partnerships with the golf course community to get something accomplished instead of fight, fight, fight."

What keeps Dodson going amid the occasional verbal barrages are enthusiastic superintendents like Peter Salinetti at Schulyer Meadows Club in Loudonville, N.Y., who contend the program has changed how they

Ron Dodson and his son, Eric, use maps to chart golf courses that are part of the Cooperative Sanctuary Program. Eric has developed an extensive Web site for Audubon International at [www.audubonintl.org](http://www.audubonintl.org).



feel about themselves, their jobs and their roles as stewards of the environment.

And although superintendents, architects, golf club managers, developers and others reap rewards through involvement with various Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary programs, they note that the programs have, in turn, benefited golf. "Until the program came along, there was nothing that effectively showed that golf courses are environmental attributes," says Dave Fearis, GCSAA president and certified superintendent at Blue Hills CC in Kansas City, Mo.

What is certain is that the program has changed the way many superintendents, assistants and crew members think about ecologically sound land management and conservation of natural resources. And instead of superintendents being blamed for everything from causing breast cancer among women to endangering birds and animals, the program through word of mouth and publicity has fostered a greater understanding of the lengths to which the men and women who manage golf courses will go to protect the environment.

### Coping with misconceptions

Even as superintendents report such positive results, only 2,000 of the nation's more than 16,000 golf courses have signed up for the program. Of those, only about 200 courses have been fully certified. After nearly nine years, those numbers are somewhat

disconcerting to Dodson and his staff.

Superintendents say they haven't signed on for a variety of reasons: It's too time consuming, it's expensive to implement environmental changes or it will create unnecessary "regulatory" hoops. Others say it's simply something they don't need.

The contention that the program costs a lot "is absolutely untrue," Dodson insists. "In the end you're going to save money." Indeed, that was the case when Phillip A. Anderson took over as superintendent at Old Westbury G&CC on Long Island, N.Y., which he once referred to as an "intensive care unit." Annual costs for chemical fertilizer and pesticide were \$150,000, but he has cut that budget to below \$8,000 and has become a proponent of organic fertilizers.

Dodson admits that courses in some states may have to take additional steps that government regulators wouldn't require in order to adhere to Audubon International's comprehensive, methodical program involving environmental planning, public involvement, wildlife and habitat management, water quality and conservation and integrated pest management. But he doesn't plan to lower standards of the six-phase certification process. That's what gives the program its value, he says.

### Hitting a moving target

Superintendents say, in theory, the Audubon program shouldn't require a lot of extra time because turf managers should employ sound environmental strategies anyway. But documenting it — dealing with the paperwork — often ends up in the superintendent's hands. That involves everything from cataloging plant and animal species to verifying steps to improve biodiversity and reduce pollution and waste. Finding members to get involved can also be tricky.

Some superintendents are able to document their certification measures in less than a year, while others shove the paperwork in a desk drawer and don't get around to certification for years.

Dodson says it's difficult to set up a program that is challenging and achievable for superintendents at both ends of the spectrum. For superintendents like Horton at high-profile courses, the bar may not be high enough. At mom-and-pop courses, it can be too high.

Another difficulty with the program is that it's based largely on the honor system, because Dodson doesn't have the staff to verify that superintendents have completed certification measures. For that reason he periodically mulls scrapping certification altogether.

But Horton is quick to add that he strongly believes the program's shortcomings are offset by the positives that motivate superintendents. "The second you

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get on the program, you can get a win," Horton says.

Dodson has purposely kept the cost to join the program at \$100 to attract more courses, even though his expenses have increased. "I'm not going to be satisfied until I have 50 percent (of all U.S. courses) in the program," he says.

The program has also attracted industry companies. When Rick Geise of Nature Safe approached Dodson to see what his company could do to support the program, Dodson said, "Join." So Nature Safe did. Now the supplier has thousands of acres of corporate grounds certified by ACSP. "We figured we should walk the walk," Geise says.

### Not that Audubon

Nothing irks officials at the National Audubon Society like a call from a misinformed media representative — or superintendent — who wants to know more about the Audubon Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses.

"I'd say I get maybe two or three calls a week from people who either are working with Audubon International who think they are working with us, or from

"It's a tough situation, and it's one that's not made any easier by the fact that a lot of golf course managers out there are perfectly happy to use the name National Audubon even though they know they're working with Audubon International," Bianchi says.

What bothers many environmentalists about Audubon International is that the non-profit organization certifies courses as Audubon Cooperative Sanctuaries.

"I'd say there's a great deal of debate in the environmental community, not over golf and not over improving management practices on golf courses, but whether we should be certifying golf courses," says David Miller, executive director of the National Audubon Society of New York State (not affiliated with Dodson's Audubon Society of New York State).

### Seeking common ground

Much of the soul searching Dodson does about fine-tuning and improving Audubon International programs takes place inside his rustic, second-story office, which overlooks dense woods and a meandering stream that eventually flows into the Hudson River. The office is inside a renovated farmhouse, part of the sprawling, 140-acre Hollyhock Hollow Sanctuary that was bequeathed to Dodson's Audubon Society of New York State.

What Dodson has determined while pacing the hardwood floors and gazing toward the vaulted ceiling is that the partnership approach to environmental stewardship is a double-edged sword. He considers his organization an environmental group first and foremost, but not a regulator. "We're a friend to anyone who believes in sustainable resource management," he says pensively.

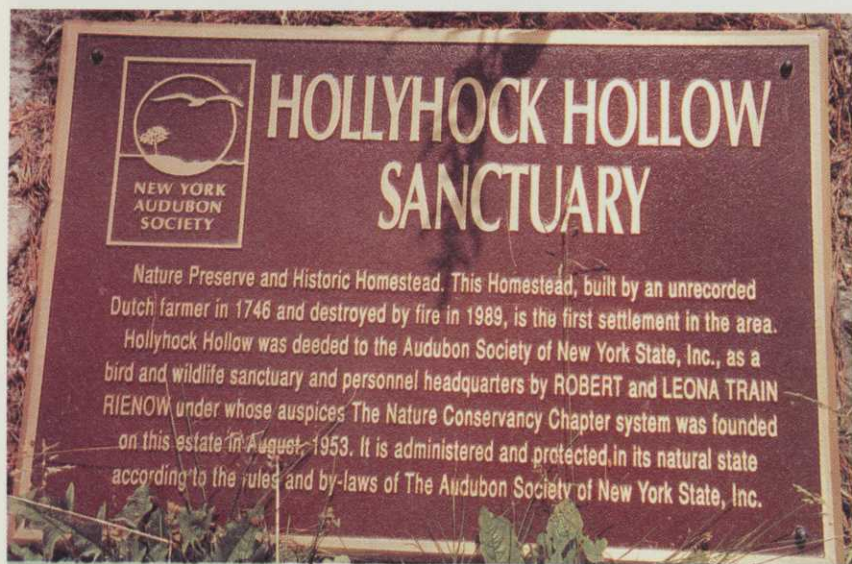
He doesn't like the fact that some superintendents get caught up in and set their sights almost solely on the certification aspect of the program, opting not to focus on bolstering their stewardship skills. So he's not sure how he feels about superintendents who hire consultants to get their courses certified. "To me, that defeats the purpose of me saying, 'This is an environmental learning experience.'"

To critics who say Dodson is more concerned with his business and making money, he notes that, ultimately, his goal is to go out of business, to have entire communities working hand in hand to improve the quality of life and the environment.

"We're a little like Jerry Lewis and the Muscular Dystrophy Telethon," Dodson says. "Jerry wants to put himself out of business with a cure for Muscular Dystrophy."

Dodson also wants superintendents to take the next step and become models to developers — to reach out to their communities.

"This program is more than just a gold star in the middle of your forehead." ■



The Hollyhock Hollow Sanctuary, deeded to the Audubon Society of New York State almost a decade ago, is national headquarters for the Society and Audubon International.

people who are running golf courses who want to get our criteria," says John Bianchi, spokesman for New York City-based National Audubon Society. "I usually say that's not us, not even remotely us."

What compounds the confusion, Bianchi says, is that at times some of the National Audubon Society chapters — which take their own positions since they are their own separate clubs — will oppose the building of a golf course that Audubon International is allied with or associated with. "And that makes for interesting though completely inaccurate newspaper reporting a lot of the time," Bianchi fumes.