

Someone to **Talk**

At the fourth National Golf & the Environment Summit, it was agreed the industry needs a spokesperson to educate golfers about the game's role in preserving the environment.

Are you interested, Mr. Palmer?

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

We recently returned from the Cornhusker state and the fourth National Golf & The Environment Summit, held in late June at the National Arbor Day Foundation's Lied Conference Center in Nebraska City, Neb.

Yes, we did say Nebraska. And let us remark that the tree-laden terrain of the Arbor Day Farm, where the conference was held, is a splendid place. Also, the Arbor Day Farm recently added its own golf course — the Palmer Course Design Co.'s ArborLinks GC, which held its grand opening during the conference.

The bottom line: It was an appropriate place to hold a golf and environment conference.

That said, how come more people from the golf industry didn't attend? Golf's role in the environment is supposed to be a major issue, right? Then why did only about 85 people attend the conference (and a lot of those people were on the conference's steering committee)?

Was the low attendance because Nebraska City is perceived as Podunk? Was the timing



Arnold Palmer teed it up for the grand opening of the ArborLinks GC during the conference.

the Talk

of the conference — the middle of the golf season for many — a bad time for people to attend? Sorry, we don't buy it.

"I was disappointed we didn't have more people in attendance," admits Paul Parker, executive vice president of the Center for Resource Management, the Salt Lake City-based environmental stewardship group that organized the conference. "We would liked to have had more participation from golf groups, like the PGA Tour and the PGA of America."

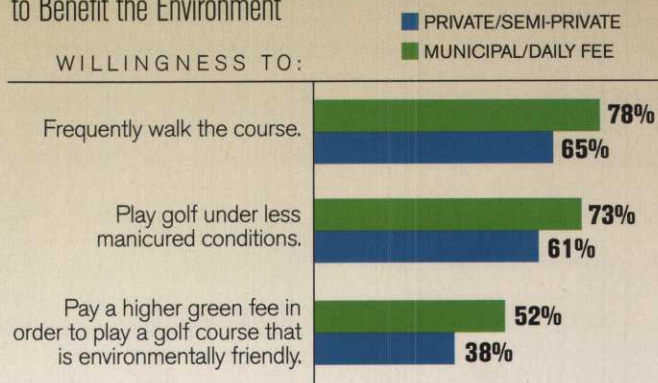
Where were those people? Where were some of the industry's other honchos, especially from the larger management companies? (We only saw Michael Quimbey from ClubCorp.) Parker said Tim Finchem, commissioner of the PGA Tour, couldn't attend because he had another commitment. Understandable, but why didn't Finchem send someone to represent the Tour?

Having someone at the conference to represent golfers — pros and amateurs — was especially important in light of the conference's main theme: how to educate the nation's 26 million players about the game's relationship with the environment.

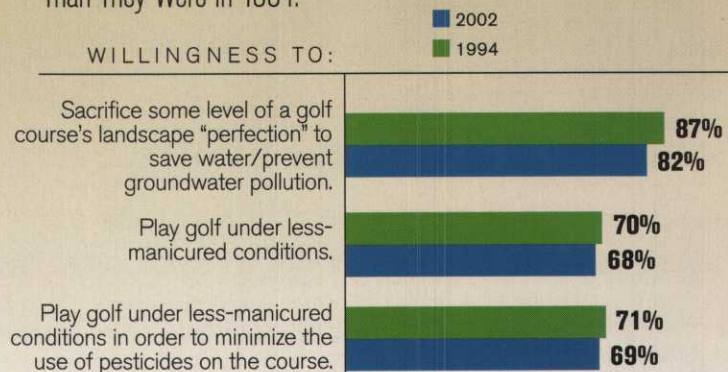
The first National Golf & the Environment Summit was held at Pebble Beach Golf Resort in 1995. Second and third conferences were held during the late '90s in Pinehurst, N.C., and Orlando, Fla. At those conferences, leaders from the golf and environment industries focused on what the golf industry could do for the good of the environment and then communicated that message to superintendents, architects, builders and others involved with the building and maintenance of courses.

"What we did at this conference was turn our attention to golfers," Parker said. "If golfers are educated and aware about the environment, they will support — and hopefully demand — environmental stewardship on golf courses."

Public Course Golfers Are More Willing to Alter Their Golf Habits to Benefit the Environment



Golfers Remain Willing to Make Changes, But to a Lesser Extent Than They Were in 1994.



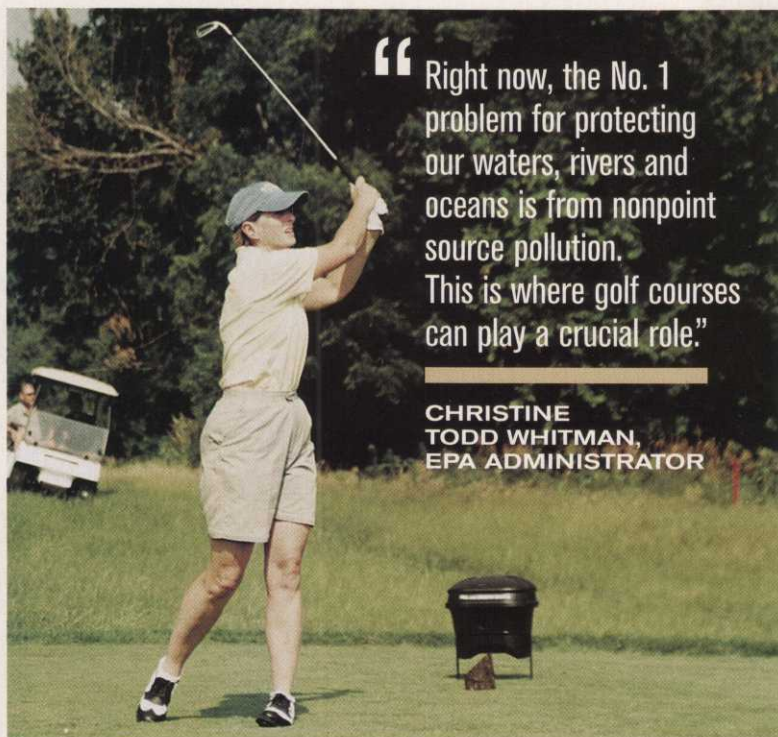
GOLF DIGEST

Wanted: A spokesperson

One topic raised at the meeting was that the golf course industry needs a spokesperson and figurehead to educate players that green isn't always great and brown isn't so bad when it comes to course conditioning. Many agreed that person should be a recognizable player.

The golf industry needs such a person, Parker says, because golf's consumer media

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CHRISTINE
TODD WHITMAN,
EPA ADMINISTRATOR

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isn't interested in running stories on courses using more native grasses and using less pesticides for the sake of the environment.

“We've heard from the media that golfers aren't interested in the environment,” Parker says. “They're interested in how to improve their swings and the latest drivers.”

But if there was a big-name spokesperson to address the issue, maybe the golf media would change its tune. At the conference, one person's name kept coming up for the post.

“There's nobody better at educating golfers than Arnold Palmer,” said Christine Todd Whitman, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, who was a keynote speaker at the conference.

“Golf and the environment has long needed a champion . . . a person and hero who can articulate how the game relates to community and respects the natural world,” said Terry Minger, president of the Center for Resource Management, in hailing Palmer as “the beacon” for environmental education in golf.

“If you're going to focus on environmental education, you couldn't have a better spokesman than Arnold Palmer,” Parker added.

How does “Arnie's Environmental Army” sound? We think it has a nice ring, but let's ask The King what he thinks.

“I'd be willing to do it,” Palmer told *Golfdom*.

“But I don't know that I have the time to do it full-time. I'll help in almost any way I can to protect the environment and enhance it.”

Translation: It doesn't sound like Palmer wants to be the poster boy to help educate golfers about the environment, but he may be willing to do a few interviews for stories or PSAs.

“We'll have to figure out a way to capitalize on his willingness to help,” Parker said.

Whitman's take

Palmer was also a keynote speaker at the conference and he officially opened ArborLinks by playing the course's front nine holes with Whitman (who, incidentally, has got game.)

Palmer, 73, grew up watching his father tend Latrobe (Pa.) CC as its superintendent. The golf course maintenance industry wasn't too concerned with environmental responsibility in those days.

“My father's dearest friends were arsenic and lead,” Palmer said. “But things have changed.”

Palmer said ArborLinks, designed by his company's Erik Larsen, is proof that an environmentally sensitive golf course can also be economically feasible (the course cost \$5.5 million).

“We need to let people know that we're working in the best interest of the environment,” Palmer said. “We're not just selfish, rich golfers whose only interest is playing the game.”

Whitman was also impressed with ArborLinks and urged the industry to build similar courses. After her round of golf with Palmer, she stood outside the course's modest clubhouse and gave a course rating — based on environmental prowess, not degree of difficulty.

Whitman, the former governor of New Jersey, said she was impressed with how ArborLinks was designed in accordance with the natural contour of the land and used native grasses. She was glad to see the course was built as a refuge for wildlife.

“Golf is rapidly getting close to baseball as the national pastime,” Whitman said. “With more courses being built, we need to understand that we all have a role in helping the environment. What's happening with this course and others being built like it will make a huge difference.”

Whitman said controlling nonpoint source (NPS) pollution is vital. NPS pollution is caused by rainfall or snowmelt moving over and through the ground. The runoff gathers pollutants and

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Mona: Give Back an Acre to Mother Nature

Steve Mona, GCSAA's CEO, introduced the association's new environmental program at the fourth National Golf & The Environment Summit — the ArborLink National Golf Course Habitat Project. The philosophy behind the program is for all of the nation's courses to try and give an acre of land back to nature in the next five years.

"We want to try and measure the amount of wildlife habitat that currently exists on golf courses, and we want to expand that number by 16,000 acres in the next five years," Mona said. "That translates into each golf course returning an acre to its natural state."

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deposits them into lakes, rivers, wetlands, oceans and drinking water sources. These pollutants include fertilizers and pesticides from agricultural lands, residential areas and golf courses.

"Right now, the No. 1 problem for protecting our waters, rivers and oceans is from non-point source pollution," Whitman said. "This is where golf courses can play a crucial role."

We asked Whitman if she thought the golf industry uses too many pesticides and chemicals, but she sidestepped the question. She did say the golf industry is becoming more important on EPA's priority list, but ranks "way below" the agricultural industry.

Golfers' takes

So what do golfers think of the environment? Jon Last, executive director of corporate marketing and research for The Golf Digest Cos., presented an eye-opening study to attendees entitled, *Trends in Golfer Perceptions & Attitudes on the Game and Its Relationship With the Environment*. Last conducted a similar study in 1994 and presented it to attendees of the first conference. Both studies featured interviews with about 300 *Golf Digest* subscribers, who were mostly male, about 50 years old and avid golfers (yeah, we know there are other golfer demographics).

The most recent study, conducted in May, revealed that golfers are less likely to participate in conservation activities than they were in 1994. Golfers also expressed contradictory opinions regarding course maintenance in the 2002 study — 75 percent said they would be willing to play on brown grass during periods of low rainfall, but 74 percent said golf courses should be uniformly maintained throughout the year for the enjoyment of golfers and enhancement of scenery.

Last's study also found that:

- 57 percent of golfers in 2002 believe that health dangers of pesticides are sensationalized by the media, compared to 44 percent in 1994.
- 46 percent of golfers in 2002 said the amount of water used on courses should only be enough to keep the grass alive, not make it green and lush, compared to 41 percent in 1994.
- 77 percent of golfers in 2002 said a golf course that integrates natural habitat would increase golfers' enjoyment of the game, compared to 80 percent in 1994.
- 47 percent of golfers in 2002 said they would

pay higher green fees to minimize the use of pesticides on courses, compared to 51 percent in 1994.

Interestingly (or not), the study indicated that golfers in the Northeast are more environmentally aware than golfers from other regions. The study also revealed that golfers who play primarily municipal/daily fee courses are more environmentally sensitive.

Last says complacency may be setting in with golfers because they "believe that courses have mitigated many environmental concerns." He also surmised that "golfers are less likely to be willing to make significant personal sacrifices to their golf experience toward an environmental end," and that "integrating environmental education into the golf experience may be a tough sell."

Those are three things the conference's steering committee probably didn't want to hear.

What's next?

It's time to take the environmental message to the streets — or the golf courses, in this case. Parker said the conference's steering committee will meet to discuss the points and opinions raised at the meeting and use them to form an organized strategy to educate golfers. The committee will also assign specific roles to certain groups, such as the GCSAA, to assist in the process.

Conference attendee and speaker Tim Hiers, certified superintendent of the Old Collier GC in Naples, Fla., says the golf industry must be subtle in its approach to make golf courses more environmentally viable. "Don't go in and make wholesale changes," warns Hiers, who advocates a five-year plan for an environmental project.

The conference itself is at a crossroads, Parker said. "We're at a point where we want to take a fresh look at the golf and environment initiative," he said, adding that the steering committee will discuss several issues related to its function, including implementing a more formal structure and staging conferences on a more regular basis (before Nebraska City, the last conference was held in 1998.)

Here's betting another conference is held sooner than later. The environment will always be near the top of the golf industry's priority list. ■

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