



# What Environmental Stewardship Means To Me

By *Gordon Waddington, Country Club of Wisconsin*

I don't know if having the golf course I manage become a Certified Audubon Sanctuary in 1996 by Audubon International's ACSP for golf courses or winning an award for Environmental Stewardship in the Midwest regional - Public Division has improved the golf course; it depends on who you talk to. Speaking for myself, I feel it helps take the game back to its roots a little and go against the Americanized standards we have seen affect many of our fine golf layouts; to me, that is fun.

I am not sure if I've finally reached maturity in life or if I am going through a mid-life crisis or both, but at 41 years of age I have finally had feelings of satisfaction overwhelm my outlook on life and work. Recently I have been able to categorize what is important to me and why. And money is NOT one of them! I congratulate those who have reached this point earlier in their lives than I did. It is a rewarding feeling. Something has made it all come together and I think I know what it is, but I am not sure it improves the golf course.

I do know that my wife and our three children are the most important priorities in my life and that being a golf course superintendent is a distant second on that list. This article is about that second priority and the personal satisfaction of being recognized as an environmental steward, and how that recognition has enhanced my feeling of success.

I am honored to know a lot of golf course superintendents in Wisconsin and elsewhere around the country, and I can say that I believe we are all environmental-

ists. That begs the question: why apply to get a piece of paper - an award - that confirms what you have been doing all along? It is for your club, your community, and maybe most importantly, it is for you. Let me tell you how I feel the honor about this distinction and how it has changed my outlook about my job and my life. An environmental opportunity like this shows that one can make a difference!

We all know too well how little recognition we receive for our efforts in creating that perfect turf for a golf game, to the point where an occasional pat on the back feels really good sometimes. We are only as good as our last season or our last project, a trite saying among us that is actually true. That can be discouraging. But we are the only ones who can change the way we are perceived. It is not the name you are called, but the name you respond to that matters most in defining who you are. Recognition as an "environmental steward" has given me weight in defining myself.

Maybe you have found another way of defining yourself. Don't keep it a secret! Environmental stewardship and the Audubon International programs have satisfied, for the most part, my desire to give something back to the industry, the professors and the superintendents who have helped make my position rewarding to me. If this award helps advance the perception of any golf course superintendent, then I have had a positive impact.

It has also helped promote my position as superintendent of our property with the owners and

management company. Even if this award only means another marketing opportunity for them - a chance at increased revenues - then so be it. I cannot blame them for that; it's their right and their job! I just thank them for the autonomy to promote the programs I do and the funds to support them.

Finally, these programs have created a positive image in the community. We have kept the "good faith" agreement the owner promised the township and the neighbors who complained about runoff contamination, worried about wells drying up, and were concerned about water being poisoned with pesticides. Let me get them a glass of water to swallow that "golf course is good" pill we are making them choke on now! You can probably sense a little bit of anger, and probably relate to it. Becoming "recognized" as an environmental steward has helped release that anger and has made me a better person and a better superintendent.

You might be thinking, "Boy, now the pressure is really on not to make a mistake, especially an environmental one." Well, bring it on! All the environmental efforts we make are all common sense, and golf course superintendents have lots and lots of common sense. That is why we have all felt that we are environmentalists. That is the fun and easy part of the job!

Professional satisfaction from the recognition is one reward, but I feel the most rewarding benefit is the personal satisfaction it brings. You cannot depend on owners, green committees or boards to create happiness for you. They can



only provide you with the resources you need to do that for yourself. You have to create your own happiness at work. We are all lucky enough to actually have the physical opportunity to change the environment for the better.

It makes me feel I have made my college professors at UW-RF proud. It makes my mom proud since she was the one who took me to the Schlitz Audubon Sanctuary on Lake Michigan so often, hoping to make me understand that nature is a great cure for the stresses of daily life. She took me there to enjoy nature and appreciate all of its beauty.

We all know that rewarding feeling we experience when we have a golf course in peak condition and wish we could have all of our colleagues there at that time. I have learned to also enjoy watching butterflies and birds never seen before on the course, to appreciate perennial beds that required lots of work to create, and to watch 50 acres of Little Bluestem grow and mature and change colors throughout the season. Baby bluebirds, a mother goose and her goslings, frost on the prairies, and a hundred other things that have come to me as a result of the stewardship program and the Audubon program; they are the things that mean a lot to me now days.

Like I said before, if there was a way to add to the bottom line with these things, superintendents would be perennial heroes. But to my wife and my kids, I am already a hero of sorts and they are the most important people to satisfy. And I feel darn good about my contribution, too. I am really glad I am not held accountable for bringing in revenue from that extra beauty of nature we have created, and I am glad I am not looked up to as the most important employee at our property (that's the person who takes the money to the bank!) because it allows me to be selfish

with my "little secret" called total happiness with my job. Being a superintendent allows me the freedom to enjoy what I got into this business for in the first place - living and working outdoors. My only concession is I have to put up with

30,000 human beings whacking around a little white ball on the manicured part of our property. Thank goodness the manicured part is only 100 of the 217 acres where I can go and "work"! ♣

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