

Jinx At The Links: Eco-Watchers Eye The Greens

I am certain that subsequent generations will shake their heads in disbelief at some of our recreational pleasures. Let's take golf as an example.

I am not a player, but my wife and children are, and they tell me that hitting that little white ball around on meticulously landscaped turf dotted with water-courses, gets them back in tune with nature. And, it is both physically and mentally rewarding.

There is no question of golf's popularity. Worldwide there are at least 50 million golfers (50 percent are American), and golf course construction is the fastest type of land development in the world. In terms of total acreage, the world's 25,000 golf courses would exceed the size of Belgium.

King James, the Scottish monarch who introduced the world to golf in the 15th century, would not recognize modern golf courses. Today's courses are a manicured monoculture that carries a stiff environmental price tag.

Anne Platt, in her article "Toxic Green, The Trouble with Golf," which appeared in the May/June issue of *Worldwatch*, addresses some of the environmental problems with golf. For example, around the world, golf course developments "displace people, destroy habitats, pollute surrounding water and air with their heavy concentration of fertilizer and pesticides and deplete public water supplies."

Water

Golf courses require enormous amounts of water. Consider, for example, that the three municipal golf courses in Tampa, Fla., use 560,000 gallons of water daily. Mining "fossil" groundwater to irrigate golf courses is clearly an unsustainable practice. North Mankato's new golf course is a case in point. They are using water from the Mount Simon-Hinckley aquifer that is thousands of years old, and it is essentially nonrenewable.

Sandra Postel in her 1992 book, "Last Oasis," reports that in 26 countries, water scarcity problems are putting a constraint on food production, economic development and protection of natural ecosystems.

Africa, the continent with the fastest growing population, also has the largest number of water-scarce areas.

In the Mid-east, nine countries have serious water problems. And, water scarcity problems also are evident in Barbados, Belgium, Hungary, Malta, Singapore and the Netherlands.

Ironically, some of the countries with water scarcity problems are the ones with the fastest growing golf course construction projects. In Thailand, a new golf course is being built every 10 days, and golf is the major cause of landlessness among rural people.

Chemicals

Thirty years ago, golf courses were treated with mercury and arsenic to make the turf bright green.

Today, these toxic metals have been replaced with heavy doses of fertilizers and pesticides.

In the United States, golf courses, on average, use about seven times the amount of pesticides applied to agricultural land.

Golf course greens with their largely sand base are a sieve for the leaching of pesticides and fertilizers into groundwater.

How these golf course chemicals may affect people is largely unknown, but the U.S. National Association of Golf Superintendents is currently funding research on the effects of pesticides on the health of greenskeepers, players and caddies.

Eco-golf

Golf as a major recreational sport is not going to vanish, but organizations like GAG'M, the global anti-golf organization, are pushing for development policies that will minimize long-term damage and risks.

Some global environmental organizations are suggesting that we return to golf courses designed not by bulldozers, but by nature. Gen Morita, head of a global anti-golf organization, says, "There is no more room on Earth to destroy nature for the sake of a mere game."

—Don Gordon, *Free Press Columnist Mankato, Minn.*

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