

Students kickstart sanctuary program

Innovative Texas A&M program can put superintendents on the road to Audubon Wildlife Sanctuary certification.

Many golf courses throughout North America are attaining certification under the USGA/Audubon Society Cooperative Sanctuary Program.

When they become certified, they join select company.

As of late spring, only 95 superintendents had completed the strenuous six-part program, says Marla Briggs, an ecologist with Audubon. The program has been in existence since 1991. About 2,000 golf courses in the U.S. and Canada have paid a \$100 membership fee as the first step in qualifying for the wildlife sanctuary designation.

One of the hot spots for the program is Texas where some 70 of the state's 900 golf courses are involved in the wildlife sanctuary certification process.

"It's the right thing to do," says Charles Joachim, superintendent at Houston's Champions Country Club, believes the program is "the right thing to



Seventy of the 900 golf courses in Texas are in the Audubon certification program.

do." His course was built in the late 1950s, after it was literally cleared of its trees, and "civilized," so to speak.

"Now we *know* we're in the city, and we have gone 180 degrees," Joachim says. "We're trying to make it be more like it was in the natural setting."

Helping out

In Texas, turfgrass students at Texas A&M University are teaming with turfgrass researcher Dr. Richard White to help superintendents in their initial steps toward certification. The group offers to conduct surveys to document wildlife and plant species that are present on participating

courses as they begin the road to sanctuary status.

The service is offered at-cost, but donations are appreciated, says White. "The students know this is important for the environment," he explains. "They see the golf course as a whole—not just the turf—and start thinking about ways to make it better. They get to begin applying principles they are learning in class."

White says that other turfgrass schools may want to consider starting similar services. "It's not as difficult as it may seem. It's something that would fit in many university wildlife/turf programs."

Adds Audubon's Marla Briggs, "We've talked to some other university's about this, but Texas A&M has been the leader so far."

This initial involvement by the Texas A&M Turf Club can be a great service to superintendents.

"The golf course superintendent wears a lot of hats," says White. "The students can supply some of the expertise that the superintendent might not have." When an unfamiliar plant or animal is located the students can bring it back to campus and do the legwork to get it identified, White says.

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"Working with golf courses—where most students hope to land jobs after graduation—is an excellent teaching tool."

Teeing off

The Turf Club students begin the process by dividing into teams for photography, property/adjoining land use, plant inventory and superintendent information. By working

in teams they can complete the task by sundown.

"We put at least 100 man-hours in during one day," White reports. "That's something a golf course superintendent would find difficult to do given time commitments."

Joachim agrees, "I gave the students some pointers on where to find wildlife and native plants, but I would not have had time to do it myself."

On the green

Another environmental success story is unfolding at Bent Tree Country Club in Dallas. When Keith Ihms took over as superintendent there he made the sanctuary certification one of his priorities. He said having the students available to do the initial resource inventory allowed him to concentrate on the other duties in his new position.

"Some people have the impression that we (at golf courses) spray with a lot of pesticides and waste water, but we are doing what we can to change that," says Ihms. He

says that Bent Tree is using the resource inventory to educate and inform club members and the surrounding community about wildlife on the course.

This project has increased the students' awareness of environmental concerns, says Dr. Richard White.

He's also looking into partnering with a local private school to build nesting boxes for the different types of birds that live on and around the golf course.

White points out that an open-door policy for wildlife has some drawbacks too, things like bird droppings, damage done to turf and ornamentals by large mammals, or the establishment of natural habitats in unsuitable locations that will

cause golfers to lose more balls or play more slowly.

Ihms agrees, but he says Bent Tree can learn to work through these problems. For instance, he contracts with an experienced trapper to humanely catch problem animals and relocate them on neighboring ranches. Recently, in fact, personnel at the course rescued some baby beavers orphaned because of unusually heavy rains. They ended up in an animal rehabilitation center to be nursed back to health.

That's a great learning experience, says White, as is participation in the sanctuary program in general.

"The exposure is great. This project has increased the students' awareness of environmental concerns and is something they will carry with them through their careers," says White. □

Audubon in review

The wildlife sanctuary certification program begins with the resource inventory. From that, the Audubon Society of New York writes a report on environmental planning specific to the particular golf course. Next, a workbook is given to the course, with five areas of concentration:

- ▶ water quality management
- ▶ water conservation
- ▶ integrated pest management
- ▶ wildlife and habitat management
- ▶ outreach and education.

Full certification may take one to three years, depending on the environmental condition of the golf course when it begins, says Marla Briggs.

"A golf course can do all five at once, or one or two at a time." "When they finish the workbook, we review and, if all is satisfactory, accept it for full certification.



Keith Ihms, superintendent at Bent Tree CC in Dallas said students' help with the initial resource inventory of the Audubon wildlife sanctuary program allowed him to concentrate on his other duties.