

# Golf Industry Category

## Ron Dodson,

president of Audubon International, Selkirk, NY

**T**he president of Audubon International may not seem an obvious candidate for a Person of the Year award in the Golf Industry category and yet Ron Dodson's impact, and the impact of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System, the Signature Cooperative Sanctuary program and the Gold Signature Cooperative Sanctuary program, is having an effect on the golf industry.

### The start

Ron Dodson started his career as a biology teacher in the midwest and in 1970 found himself in Henderson, KY, where the John James Audubon museum is located. From his initial contact, this self-described "fence-climbing radical" never looked back.

The idea of a "Community Conservation Network" began to develop around 1985 as a plan to have entire communities committed to conservation ideals. In 1988, with Dodson promoting the idea at conferences and to community leaders, he found that the interest level was extremely low. Dodson didn't give up on his idea, but decided, "Okay then let's go door to door. If we get enough citizens involved, maybe we'll end up with a community."

### Golf gets involved

When this approach seemed to be working, Dodson turned his sights to businesses. Dodson did not have golf courses in his immediate plans, although as a golfer in college he realized that golf courses had a lot of potential. But it wasn't until a call from a course in upstate New York that things started moving. But from that modest beginning, there are now 2,000 golf courses in the Cooperative Sanctuary program.

### The strategy

Dodson won't claim to having a business plan or a system for success. His philosophy is simple: "We're going to work with anyone, anywhere and everywhere and not discriminate who we work with... and we'll just take one door at a time, one step at a time."

There is no doubt that this approach has been successful in large part to his attitude and his gift for communication. Bob Swift, development manager of the Indian River Club, Vero Beach, FL, says that when he first read an interview with Dodson he was impressed, "I felt he was someone I wanted to meet and talk to."

Indian River became the third golf course to become a Signature Cooperative Sanctuary. Swift says that the entire experience has been rewarding both personally and professionally. Dodson's approach,



says Swift "has been to move the dialogue to a cooperative rather than antagonistic approach."

Prior to his work with golf course superintendents, Dodson acknowledges that he didn't really have a grasp on the responsibilities and range of knowledge required—"water quality protection, wildlife management, agronomics, horticulture"—as well as taking the time to "talk to golfers, work in the community, be involved in schools and be committed to outdoor management which includes a whole lot more than just how fast a green is."

Dodson finds great satisfaction in seeing his idea expand and grow, but has taken his knocks too. Early on, some environmental groups attacked the idea of working with golf courses. It was a shock for Dodson, who sees himself as an avid environmentalist. "I still go home sometimes and think, have I really gone over the edge here? I don't think I have, but some people think that I have sold my soul to the devil."

But Dodson is philosophical and believes that "when you cut through it, what is really most important is to care about people." □

## Ron Dodson career highlights

- 1970:** Initial involvement with the National Audubon Society
- 1978-1982:** Executive Director of the Western Kentucky Environmental Planning Agency
- 1982-1987:** Regional Vice President of National Audubon Society
- 1985:** Awarded National Environmentalist of the Year
- 1985:** Idea for community-based conservation program takes shape
- 1987:** President of Audubon International
- 1988:** Pitches program to community leaders
- 1991:** First golf course registers in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program
- 1992:** First golf course project registers in the Audubon Signature Cooperative Sanctuary Program
- 1993:** Awarded the GCSAA President's Award for Environmental Leadership
- 1997:** First golf course project registers in the Audubon Gold Signature Cooperative Sanctuary Program
- 1997 to present:** Co-chairman of the USGA Wildlife Links Research Committee