

THE ROLE OF A GOLF COURSE WITHIN AN URBAN ENVIRONMENT

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Ecology is becoming a household word at last. The word was constructed from two Greek words: "oikos," meaning "house," and the suffix meaning "keeping or understanding the order of." It is the misuse of the environment that has made us face up to the fact that we must do something fast in learning to understand our relationship to the environment, and finding our place in it. We have gone too far in reshaping it to our own detriment.

As a golf course superintendent, I am concerned with the role played by a golf course within an urban environment. In this role, I think of myself as a curator of Nature in a situation where the economic pressures work toward destroying every last remnant of the natural order of things. These economic pressures are short-sighted solutions to satisfying only man's basic needs. This has placed us in the emotional and spiritual dilemma in which we find ourselves today.

Our young people are expressing this crying need for the deeper values of the soul - for beauty, for freedom (or at least relief) from manmade pressures, for the soothing quiet in which their spirits might grow. Most are not prepared to battle the wilderness, but they yearn for what the wilderness has to offer. We, as well as the young people, know only through history that the wilderness was once an irritant to man - a threat and an obstacle. Instead, we find ourselves masters - I'd rather say trustees - of a vanishing natural order, and

so far have not shown ourselves to be equal to the responsibility.

Now that most of the natural world has been destroyed and scarred in man's drive for ease and comfort, we are just beginning to realize that we cannot live completely free of Nature. We are part of it. We need to be near to the soil, to turn it over, to feel the warmth of the sun, and air that is refreshing. This need explodes in the spring-time when we have a drive to get outside - to walk, to breathe deeply, to expand from within, to reach out to infinity. We want to take time to unwind with the growing things and life that responds only to the easy rhythm of unhurried nature. There is order and balance that the human environment never seems to achieve. Nature gives us a feeling of continuity, a faith in the renewal of life that seemed to have spent itself, a touch with an eternal cycle.

Urban and suburban development has progressed so far over the deep end that practically all contact with these joys has been denied millions of people. Even a breath of fresh air is denied us all, and how can we feel expansive without taking a deep breath? And man is so adaptive, even to ugliness and filth, we could easily lose all experience with the quiet and inward joys of nature; perhaps not even miss them, nor realize any longer the need for this contact. We've already gone a long way down this road. Already our society has adapted to the destruction (called construction) of the landscape, and people have adjusted to driving hundreds of nerve-racking and boring miles for a few days in the woods and fresh air. Why shouldn't we expect natural areas to be a necessary part of our everyday environment? Golf courses, parks and other recreational areas ought to be considered a requirement of the ecology - not a luxury that can be given up for future needs of expansion.

These open areas preserve man's touch with nature, and hence the appreciation of, and consequent desire for the values derived from it. Since man responds only to things he is familiar with, he must have contact with better things in order to appreciate the finer things within himself. A beautiful golf course can make natural beauty an integral part of the city man's life.

Those of us who work in the outdoors are fortunate, and we know it. People ask me, "You mean you get paid to work out here?" But only if everyone has a chance to enjoy the outdoors in some way, will the natural areas be preserved - for open space of any kind is endangered as soon as the need for, or use of that open space lapses. Someone must need it - and know that he needs it personally - to be willing to protect its existence. Even as nature abhors a vacuum, men seem to abhor undeveloped land. We are victims of the profit motive.

A golf course superintendent can help by making people aware that they are getting more than a game of golf. He can develop the natural potential on the course, not being satisfied with maintaining an unbroken expanse of grass that has as little interest as a suburban lawn. Every course has its unique natural ecology. Learn about your course's potential and develop it. Your reward will be in the comments of those who can appreciate these things, and especially from those who open their eyes and begin to see something more than the ball. The most rewarded golfer is the one who can enjoy the golf course as much as a low score for the day.

A family friend made a trip last year to central Europe with the Ohio Forestry Association, and wrote: "The whole landscape is as well kept as our golf courses. We Americans have much to learn about the stewardship of our Mother Earth."

In this respect, also, I see a role for our golf courses - as educators of a public whose experience with natural areas has been mainly one of exploitation. It will take a complete turn-about in attitude to get the American people to assume responsibility for the preservation of what natural land they still have access to. Being a controlled area, the golf course can implant ground rules that can serve to educate the public in the care of the environment. On the golf course, they can have it impressed on them that divits leave bare holes, that litter is visual pollution, and that etiquette makes a pleasureable experience where conflict could arise.

One day I informed a student golfer that he was dragging his bag through a sand trap. "What are you getting so het up for," he asked me. "It's my bag." This boy represents the blind self-concern so typical of the mass of American citizens. He represents the people we need to educate to think beyond their own possessions, to understand that the public domain is the responsibility of all who use it, not just those who work there.

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SLIDES: To illustrate what we have been doing to our environment, and some pictures of the Yale Golf Course to give an idea of the natural beauties which can be preserved within an urban area.