

**Golf cleaning up its ecological act
'Green' takes on new meaning for today's course designers
The Province
Sunday, August 19, 2007
Byline: Paul Luke**

Not long ago, Canada's golf courses resorted to the following shameless arguments to neutralize fairway-hating environmentalists:

* We're not bad ecological dudes, the links insisted. We're much nicer than the competition -- shopping malls, factories, parking lots, six-lane highways.

* We bring your communities oceans of soothing greenery and generate oxygen for your residents.

Environmentalists would have none of it. You're a toxic disgrace, they sneered. You spew pesticides into lakes and streams, destroy habitat and snort vast amounts of precious water. You bulldoze natural features that stand in the way of your drive to sculpt 18 holes of immaculately groomed parkland.

But over the past 15 years, the country's golf courses have made an effort to get their ecological act together. Many of today's designers balance the commercial values of playability and appearance with the goal of environmental harmony.

"The biggest challenges are to take a raw piece of ground, understand its biological functions and then put on a golf course that doesn't disrupt those functions or may, in fact, enhance them," says Michael Hurdzan, a course architect and president of Hurdzan/Fry, a links design firm in Columbus, Ohio.

"Some golf courses are at the head of the class and some aren't." Hurdzan, whose award-winning firm completes about six to eight course designs a year, hopes one of his current projects, an 18-hole course overlooking Okanagan Lake, will be among B.C.'s most environmentally amiable courses.

The site, part of the \$1.4-billion LakeStone resort development, will offer a gorgeous view from 300 metres above the lake. But the need to juggle environmental, commercial, social, climactic and geological values makes designing the highland course as challenging as it gets, Hurdzan says.

"There are layers and layers of complication," Hurdzan says. "We have done a lot of golf courses in the mountains but it takes more creativity and you have to work harder on a site like this." The rugged location is home to pines, maples, brush, grasses and berry bushes, he says. Part of the area has been logged, while some trees in the area show signs of pine beetle attack.

Top dirt will be hauled up the mountain to supplement the thin, sandy soils, Hurdzan says. An irrigation lake will provide a home for frogs and other life forms not currently found onsite, he says.

Okanagan environmentalist Dick Cannings says it would be admirable to nurture a wetland on the course, but only if it's not at the expense of an existing wildlife home -- and if the new amphibians are shielded from the chemicals to which they're so sensitive.

Cannings, who belongs to the Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Alliance, has not visited the site.

In general, habitat loss and fragmentation, not pesticide use, is the biggest eco-impact of a golf course, Cannings says.

"Because golf courses require such a big chunk of land for people to whack a ball around the best way to be green is to minimize the footprint on the environment," he says.

Golf-course designers have long known that manicured turf -- although it can be good at scrubbing pollutants -- has little habitat value. Royal Canadian Golf Association agronomist Teri Yamada says environmentally sensitive designers keep mowed and irrigated surfaces to a minimum.

Course architects let indigenous plants thrive in unmowed, out-of-play areas to serve as food and shelter for wildlife, she says. Designers try to protect pond dwellers from fertilizers by leaving buffers of unmowed grass

