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Should we care what people think about golf?

Did you watch the programme on BBC4 recently (“Dark Side of the Greens”) which presented a powerful anti-golf message? I did, and it worried me. It worried me because I feared that the casual viewer, who may not be aware of what the golf industry in the UK is really like, would go away convinced that golf is an environmental disaster area, and needs to be reined in. I don’t pretend that the industry is environmentally perfect, but I do know that in the UK (and in many cases internationally) it has a good record which does not deserve to be unfairly tarnished.

Anyone watching one of Anthony Baxter’s films will know that he has strong views about big business and its’ relationship to ordinary people. His two films about golf focus on Donald Trump’s development of the Menie Estate on the Aberdeenshire coast, and on a proposed luxury golf resort overlooking the UNESCO site of the Old City of Dubrovnik in Croatia. His message is hard-hitting, and the viewer is left in no doubt of Baxter’s strong views on these cases.

I have a strong suspicion that most people who see these programmes will come away with a very poor perception of the golf industry, which is not a helpful position for the industry in the UK to be in. I know very well that there are many excellent examples of clubs delivering real environmental benefits, and often working closely with national or local wildlife or other environmental organisations to do this. There are formal accreditation schemes run by organisations such as the Golf Environment Organisation, there is detailed technical support and encouragement available from The R&A and from the national governing bodies for golf in the UK, and there are organisations such as STRI and BIGGA providing advice and training. And there are good relationships with statutory environmental agencies such as Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage, and Natural Resources Wales.

But do we as an industry do enough to make all these good things better known to people more widely? Do we in golf clubs put any significant effort into helping local communities understand what contribution we are making to the quality of their local environment? I suspect the honest answer is no, although there are certainly some clubs who are very good at this. I suspect too that we have the same challenge with our own members, many of whom are only interested in the condition of the course, and who may think that any work done in the roughs or out of play areas is a complete waste of time.

The real question is, does this matter? You can probably guess my answer. We in golf clubs don't operate in a vacuum. We live within a regulatory system which is likely to put increasingly strong controls on things such as the use of water to irrigate courses, the use of pesticides and fungicides, and the discharge of waste water. And if we want to extend the clubhouse, build a new course, or maybe even change the management of some of the land peripheral to the golf course, consent will need to be secured from the local authority or some other agency. And these organisations are alive to public opinion and perception, and can be swayed by high profile anti-golf messages in the media. Surely it makes sense for the industry to do more to raise public awareness of how it really operates, and especially to be much more positive in promoting the good environmental things which are being done?

If you accept the logic of these arguments, the real question is "what can we do about it"? And I suspect that's where the best intentions often run into the sand. It isn't easy to find ways to get good messages out, but it can be done and I believe it's something that we should think harder about. Let me offer some thoughts about practical steps which might be taken.

A good first start is your own green staff. They are the people out there every day, and they probably have a very good appreciation of the environmental features on the property, which could be historic parkland, ancient trees, a variety of species of animals and plants, a range of habitat types, or even impressive landscape features. Knowing what you have is always the best place to start from, so creating an inventory is a good idea. It could perhaps be done by greenkeepers, or you may be able to find a club member who has the necessary skills – there are more people about who are interested in birds, butterflies, fungi and plants than you might think. Or you could approach your local wildlife trust for help; they will often be very interested to see what you have on the property, and once they see what a good job you are doing on maintaining it, they are likely to become enthusiastic supporters. That's certainly been the case at Temple Golf Club in Berkshire, where a very good relationship with the Berkshire Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust has been established. There are other groups too, such as Butterfly Conservation, Buglife, or the Amphibian & Reptile Conservation Trust.

Once you know what you have you need to think about who you want to tell about it, and how. Again, it's often a good idea to start with your members, and if you have a good inventory, and enthusiastic greenkeepers or members, you can do that by creating displays in the clubhouse of species or features which can be seen on the course through the seasons. Many clubs now include such material on their websites too. There are perhaps bigger questions about what you want to do about making such information more widely available outside the club, and those will be ones that you need to think about using your understanding of the local situation. But if you can get local environmental organisations on your side through making them feel informed and

engaged with, they are much more likely to be with you, rather than against you, if you have plans to develop in any way. Local authorities take note of what local environmental organisations say in response to proposals, so they may be more influential than they appear.

Some clubs include environmental information within published course planners, either as general information or as specific comments and illustrations relating to individual holes. Others have environmental display boards around the course, and some are engaged with environmental programmes such as Operation Pollinator which aim to increase populations of vulnerable species such as bees. You probably have good relations with the Sports Editor of your local paper; have you ever thought about giving the paper information on environmental initiatives which you're taking? That's a good way to raise your profile locally in a positive way.

There are bigger questions perhaps around what golf's governing bodies might do to counter anti-golf messages more widely, and there is a strong argument that says this is important too. If UK government departments, or the EU, have a misleading perception of the golf industry, this is going to influence policy decisions which could impact on golf, and this matters to all of us.

The take home message is that it's too easy for the media to influence the general public with punchy headlines or programmes which make golf look bad, and that once negative perceptions have been created it's much more difficult to change them. Do you think this matters, and if so, what can you, and the industry more widely, do about it? And more importantly, what are you actually going to do? This ultimately is a matter for individual clubs to decide, but what I think really matters is that it is actually thought about, rather than being side-lined because it's not directly related to playing golf. Our industry is much better than it is often portrayed as, and we should be more confident about showing it.