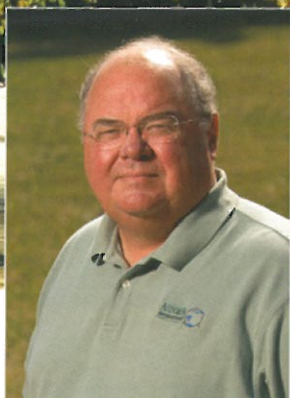


The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program *Celebrates 20 Years!*

Compiled and Edited by Shelly Foy, USGA Green Section



Editor's note: This section consists of a series of articles highlighting the benefits of participating in the ACSP. They have been edited slightly to conserve space.

INTRODUCTION

*By Ron Dodson, President,
Audubon International*

It seems nearly impossible to believe that it has been 20 years since we launched the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System. What started as a new way to promote membership with an environmental organization has started a partnership-oriented approach to conservation.

We wanted to stop yelling and screaming and start listening and working with people where they lived, worked, and recreated. With the help and support of the United States Golf Association, we have been proven right!

Although we have always said that we will work with anyone, anywhere, it has been golf by far that has outpaced any other type of land use in participation in the Cooperative Sanctuary System.

The program works because golf course superintendents want to work outdoors, they understand plant management, they don't want to spend any more money than necessary to meet golfer expectations. I would hazard to guess that the majority have found that managing bird nesting boxes, watching bald eagle nestlings, taking pictures of the

occasional fox on the course – and even the deer that made tracks across the green – was actually a very pleasant addition to the work week.

As states go, Florida has been the leader of the pack. There are more golf courses in Florida than any other state, but even on a percentage basis, Florida is a leader.

The recent economy has been tough on everyone; but Florida seems to be especially hard hit. The management of Audubon worried about the state of the economy and what sort of drop-off rate we were going to see in our membership ranks.

But a drop-off didn't occur, and this includes the hard-hit courses of Florida. I like to think most golf course superintendents understand that conservation starts with the word "conserve" and that doesn't only mean environmental conservation, but it also includes economic conservation.

Doing good for the environment means doing good for the budget. Courses embedded with a conservation ethic embedded in the fabric of the way the course operates, the way the course management thinks, and the way the course membership acts, are the least likely to close up shop.

Those courses that were built on the foun-

dation of over-use, hard-to-maintain and unrealistic expectations are the first ones to face the economic realities we have all read about in the newspapers. While it is sad to hear about a course closing and friends and neighbors losing jobs, the situation was brought about by previous, unsustainable decisions.

Florida is in a tough position, but those courses that come out of this downturn will be the strong, conservation-oriented courses, and they will be even stronger. Walking the walk is much more important than just talking the talk.

Thanks for sticking with us these past 20 years and I look forward to the next 20!

Estero Country Club: The 100th Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary in Florida

By Shelly Foy

I had the pleasure of touring Estero Country Club very early on a recent cool, foggy Monday morning when the course was closed for maintenance. Even though the course is totally surrounded by urban sprawl, I felt I was in a nature preserve. I now understand why superintendents say their favorite time on the golf course is very



Estero Country Club is the 100th Florida Course Certified in the ACSP Program. Photo by Shelly Foy.

early in the morning when no golfers are in sight.

Superintendent Bruce Bach had invited me to speak to the members about the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, and to present the club with its certificate signifying it was the 100th golf course in Florida and the 796th in the world to be certified in the program!

Estero CC was built in 1985 on 167 acres of former pasture. This club with 350 golfing members beautifully illustrates how a course, completely surrounded by residential area, can offer great habitat for a variety of wildlife. It has an outstanding ACSP in place, and the keys to its success have been member support and commitment, naturalizing out-of-play areas, and replacing a 22-year old irrigation system.

Bruce said members had been interested in the ACSP for a long time, and knew replacing the irrigation system would yield successful results. In June 2008, the course underwent a five-month irrigation replacement project.

Management also wanted to reduce turf, so the original designer, Gordon Lewis, developed naturalized areas to replace 7 acres of turf. The goal was to reduce water use

by 15 percent with the new system and an additional 10 percent by replacing turf with natural areas. The club now saves \$50,000 annually on repairs to the irrigation system, and anticipates significant savings with its 20-year contract with Lee County to provide the club with reclaimed water; their sole water source.

Jim Sluiter, staff ecologist with Audubon International, noted that "Estero Country Club's water conservation on the golf course is exceptional. The new irrigation system provides outstanding reliability and flexibility in their watering program. Uniform and responsible irrigation has resulted in reduced fungicide applications as well... I am learning that the certification submissions delivered by a course are often a great reflection of their dedication to their stewardship efforts. Estero C. did an exceptional job submitting all materials. The comprehensive water quality testing was very good, and their formal documentation of all efforts speaks highly of their work ethic."

Estero Country Club's outreach and education program keeps members updated on the ACSP, and reaches out to include the surrounding community in environmental programs and projects.

Estero hosts an annual Golf Maintenance Facility Open House for members and neighbors. It recently worked with Boy Scout Troop 119 to install 20 nestboxes to be monitored by club members.

The club's Resource Advisory Committee includes members, staff, Lee County officials, experts on horticulture, landscape, and irrigation, as well as a local superintendent who is very active in the ACSP. The committee meets regularly to discuss ongoing and planned environmental efforts. Club members strongly support ACSP, and plan continued outreach and education programs to improve and expand the club's environmental stewardship efforts as well as its standing in the larger community.

Estero members are involved in every aspect of their program, including water-quality management. Staff educated homeowners about the effects of poor fertilizing practices on the health of the lake system and encouraged them to discuss the problem with their lawn-maintenance contractors.

Since joining the ACSP, the golf course now uses 90 percent slow-release fertilizer and has increased use of natural organic fertilizer to further minimize the potential for leaching and nutrient runoff. In 2007



Recent Estero irrigation upgrades improved turf quality and helped reduce costs.

Photo by Shelly Foy.

Estero established buffers by raising the height of cut along all lake banks from 1.25 to 6 inches.

The result has been lower maintenance requirements in lakes for control of algae and aquatic weeds, and a steady increase in the amount of wildlife. Ducks once were rare; now several species call Estero CC home. Wading birds are in abundance, and eagles and osprey regularly fish the lakes. A family of otters often visits. Estero's inventory lists 53 birds, and more than 14 species of mammals, including bobcats. Management has received nothing but positive responses from members about the increase in wildlife and the beauty of the naturalized areas.

Since joining the ACSP, Estero CC has added 20 wildlife habitat areas, and has decreased the amount of managed turfgrass by an additional 7 acres for a total of 23.9 acres of natural areas.

They restored 1.8 acres of wetlands and increased their native plant percentage from 50 to 75 percent. They have increased their naturalized shoreline from 25 to 75 percent. They regularly remove exotic plants – 90 melaleuca trees in 2009 and this year ficus trees. Member education about the problems caused by invasive trees was key to the removal program.

A unique feature of Estero CC is a railroad track that runs through the middle of the property, which is seldom used except by maintenance vehicles. The Seminole Gulf Railroad owns 65 ft. on each side of

the track and is responsible for maintaining this acreage. The roadbed creates an incredible wildlife corridor.

Estero CC also has reduced fungicide use, a move made possible by the new irrigation system and the ability to maintain healthier turf with fewer inputs. Committing to spot-spraying instead of broadcast or boom spraying, fungicide expenditures are now one-third of what they were in 2004, and insecticide expenditures have been cut in half.

The real success to Estero Country Club's environmental programs is they have made good, solid, well-conceived decisions. The members have bought into the program.
