

Golf Tourism: Economic Benefits vs. Environmental Impacts

“In this age of increasing environmental awareness, there is no more room on Earth to destroy nature for the sake of a mere game.” The Global Anti-Golf Movement (GAM)



Tourism Concern first took issues with golf nearly twenty years ago – an unwinnable campaign – one we could not ignore. The phenomenal growth of golf tourism had even the driest countries competing for tourists by prioritising golf course development.

The situation still shocks: Cyprus, seriously short of water, is developing 14 new courses to save its troubled tourism industry. Any movement towards more environmentally-friendly course management is undermined by more traditional thinking.

There are now 32,000 courses around the world: up from 25,000 in the mid-1990s – which at that time would have covered an area of the size of Belgium. The UK has the highest density in the world: about 0.6% of the land is covered by 2,600 courses, a 40% increase in the past thirty years. In Japan there are over 20 million players. And they pay a high price to travel the world for their golfing holidays.

The analysis of golf tourism requires an examination of its environmental, social, economic aspects plus human rights issues – particularly those of land ownership.

Chemicals

Water and chemicals are prerequisites for any golf course. The chemical run-off from a golf course in Japan destroyed crops and created not only deformed fish but also GAM and its World No Golf Day. It is unlikely that this stopped anyone playing golf, but it was consciousness raising and leading UK media in the UK devoted considerable attention.

The pesticides, herbicides, fungicides and artificial colouring agents poison not only the soil and fauna but also human health. George Monbiot, an environmental activist, reveals: ‘An 18-hole course requires, on average, 22 tonnes of chemical treatments, mostly pesticides, every year: seven times the rate per hectare for industrial farming. A study shows higher rates of some cancers, such as non-Hodgkin's

lymphoma (which has been associated with certain pesticides), among golf course superintendents’.



Water

Golf courses are no longer developed as adjuncts to luxury hotels, but rather as a necessity – as they are for villa developments. In Spain the coastline from Murcia to Almeria is nicknamed the ‘Costa del Golf’. Estimates vary but in 2005 El Pais reported that 130 golf courses were in development within the Valencia and Murcia regions alone, adding to the dozens there already.

UNESCO estimates that tourists visiting Granada in Spain use seven times more water than local people, with daily usage as high as 440 litres. Golf courses in the area need between 10,000 and 15,000 cubic metres of water per hectare a year, which is the same as a rice paddy. Thus the annual water consumption of a course could reach one million cubic metres – the same as a town with a population of 12,000 inhabitants. It is even more worrying in Thailand where a course typically uses as much water as 60,000 rural villagers (UNESCO Water Portal Weekly, 2006).

Land Abuse

Local and foreign business people, politicians and military leaders tend to form powerful alliances to support lucrative development projects. The worldwide construction of golf courses is married to dispossession and environmental destruction.



The problem is particularly acute in south-east and east Asia, where golf is big business, and land rights and the environment are often ignored by governments. Tourism Concern knows of very many accounts of battles between peasant farmers or indigenous people and golf course developers, e.g. in Hacienda La’oc in the Philippines, the year 2000 saw two farmers resist a course planned for their lands, mutilated and shot dead.

Poverty vs. Wealth

Resorts, hotels and golf courses often divert land, water, energy and access to biodiversity away from poor communities, and so make it harder for rural women and young girls to obtain water and fuel for household use. Fulfilling such basic needs competes with schooling in many poor communities. In theory, the construction of tourism infrastructure should benefit local residents by way of new and expanded services. Such benefits are often beyond the reach of the very poor, who may actually be worse off if tourism and its train of golf courses deny them access to productive land, water, biodiversity and other resources upon which their livelihoods depend.

By Tricia Barnett (Tourism Concern)

www.tourismconcern.org.uk

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