

Japan: Polluted by Golf Courses

Japan's economic success is causing many serious environmental problems, but one stems not from its factories but from too many golfers. In the late 1980s, several groups actively opposing golf course throughout Japan met in Kobe for their third annual national convention.



Here is powerful testimony to the seriousness with which communities consider the adverse effects of golf courses. According to a report by the OECD, Japan's early success in combating pollution is threatened by increasingly wasteful patterns of consumption.

Japan's total land area is about the same as the state of California. Over 100 million people live in this land space.

Before World War II, there were only 23 golf courses in all of Japan and only 72 in 1956. Now, there are a total of 1,700 golf courses in operation, with another 330 under construction and roughly 1,000 in various stage of planning.

Japan consists of islands covered by many mountains, and it is fairly easy to develop golf courses rather than developing agriculture and housing. Developers clear-cut the forests and use bulldozers to level hilltops and fill in valleys. As a result, golf course construction is identical to the destruction of environment.



Even though 67 percent of Japan's total land area is covered by forest, its forest products self-sufficiency rate has fallen 30 percent. Japan now must import much of the timber used in construction and the wood chips used for making pulp.

Forests serve as a kind of natural dam, storing rainwater in the leaves and soil. Natural water circulating from forests feeds rivers and streams. In contrast, golf courses have only one-fourth the water retention capacity of an equivalent forest area. Most rainwater simply runs off the greens and fairways. This produces flooding downstream.

On the contrary, the water flow to rivers and creeks downstream from golf courses drops to a dribble during periods of drought. During golf course construction, rainfall sends mud pouring from the barren ground into streams. This often makes the water inappropriate for agricultural or residential use.

An 18-hole golf course requires three to four tons of various germicides, herbicides, and pesticides every year to keep the green and fairways healthy, to combat weeds, and kill insects.

Some of these chemicals are carcinogenic, while others are known to cause deformities and nerve damage. There have been reports of massive fish kills in fish hatcheries polluted by toxins in the water from golf courses. The nitrogen and phosphorus in the fertilizers will mix with rainwater and eventually flow into a reservoir. The high nutrient content of water will stimulate the growth of algae. Consequently, this requires the water treatment plant to use higher volumes of chlorine to cleanse the water.



Golf courses use pesticides containing organic phosphorus. After application, the pesticides evaporate in the air and are absorbed by the human body via the skin and lungs. Caddies and greenkeepers often experience health problems because of the air pollution. Golfers themselves breathe in the toxins as they walk the course before the newly sprayed pesticides have settled down.

Winds sometimes carry the chemical agents to surrounding neighborhoods, and people living near golf courses worry that their health may also be affected. Golf has an image as a healthy sport, but it may be quite different in reality.

A research group in Canada also identified the problematical factors of golf courses. Soil samples were taken from greens and fairways, and sediment samples were taken from waterways and analyzed for the presence of mercury. Greens had the highest mean mercury concentration, and the majority of greens exceeded Canadian environmental levels set for mercury in soil.

Sediment from a golf course lake had higher mercury levels than a lake located 5 km from the course. Mussels from both lakes were analyzed, and those from the golf course lake near the greens had methylmercury and total mercury levels an order of magnitude greater than those from the reference lake.

Fish in both lakes contained methylmercury, but the level was higher in fish collected near the golf course greens. The construction of golf courses in scenic natural sites, such as forest areas and coral islands, also results in the destruction of biodiversity.

Top Five Golf Countries

Currently it is estimated that there are around 35,000 golf courses in the world, of which the top five countries (USA, UK, Japan, Canada and Australia) account for 76%. These golf courses cover an area of approximately 17,238 km², an area equivalent to the size of Kuwait.

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