Ontario Golf Courses Engaged in Environmental Sustainability: A Comparative Study

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Environmental sustainability (ES) in sport, or safeguarding the natural environment for future sporting generations, has been examined to a limited extent, with studies on topics such as ski resorts (Spector, Chard, Mallen, & Hyatt, 2012; Todd & Williams, 1996) and the Olympic Games (Cantelon & Letters, 2000; Lenskyj, 1998; Lesjo, 2000; Loland, 2006; Paquette, Stevens, & Mallen, 2011; Preuss, 2007). However, despite calls for more research on ES, both in sport (Chalip, 2006; Thibault, 2009; Hums, 2010; Mallen & Chard, 2011, 2012) and the broader business context (Haigh, 2005; Winn & Kirchgeorg, 2005; Bansal & Kistruck, 2006), much of the sport industry has yet to be examined for ES.

Golf has been criticized for its negative impacts on the environment (Bartlett & James, 2011; Chalip, 2006; Hums, 2010; Jackson, Kelly, & Brown, 2011; Stoddart, 2006; Thibault, 2009; Wheeler & Nauright, 2006; Winn & Kirchgeorg, 2005). Increased pressure from the public, academics, and industry professionals to incorporate ES initiatives into golf course operations lead the researchers to seek understandings about how courses are currently meeting this challenge.

The purpose of this comparative case study research was to explore ES initiatives at five top-ranked Ontario golf courses that were recognized within the top 60 courses within the Score Golf Top 100 golf courses in Canada in 2012 (Score Golf, 2012) and by the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf (ACSP) as engaging in ES practices. The researchers sought to answer four Research Questions: (1) How is the sport of golf safeguarding the natural environment? (2) How has golf adapted to be environmentally sustainable? (3) What are the best practices for golf course operations in ES? and (4) What are the key barriers in golf ES? How could they be overcome?

Data collection involved in-depth interviews (n=10) with upper and middle managers at each course (n=5), site tour observational notes, and content analyses of websites/documents. Data collection was framed with both an adaptation of the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) Requirement and Guidance for Organizers of Sustainable Events (CSA, 2010) and the Sustainable Sport and Event Toolkit (SSET) (Duffy & Dolf, 2010).

Data analysis was guided by three frameworks: dimensions of convergence (Houlihan, 2012); impression management (Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Bansal & Kistruck, 2006; Fisk & Grove, 1996; Schlenker, 1980); and message framing (Cheng, Woon, & Lynes, 2011; Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Levin, Gaeth, & Sirebier, 2002; Van de Velde, Berbeke, Popp, & Van Huylenbroeck, 2010).

Conclusions indicated that, although each golf course had earned ACSP accreditation, ironically, the policies that encouraged ES initiatives also acted as a bureaucratic barrier that hindered ES advances. Examples will be presented, along with recommendations for overcoming this key barrier. Additionally, five best practices in golf course ES will be revealed, including one best practice in impression management and message framing found in the communication strategies with internal stakeholders.

Further research on sport and ES is needed to fill the gap between the calls for environmental safeguards and the realities concerning barriers and best practices for moving forward. For instance, multiple sports need to be examined based on their progress in ES. In particular, understanding ES best practices in several sports could aid sport as a whole to move forward to safeguard the natural environment for future generations in sport.