

Developing an environmentally sound industry (and letting people know about it)

RECENTLY AN STMA FRIEND called me a treehugger, and meant it as a compliment. I've been figuratively hugging trees for years, but it wasn't long ago that environmentalism and turfgrass management seemed worlds apart. It's wonderful to see us moving steadily toward closing that gap as our industry evolves.

The attitudes of society are also changing. Bluntly stated, as our civilization has grown and spread, environmental degradation has followed. Our generation has recognized that this trend cannot continue. We want to mend the dysfunctional relationship between the human population and the rest of the natural world. (It's a pity clean air and water have become political kickballs.)



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We must deal with humankind's dirtier habits and the danger they present to the planet's life-supporting capacity. On March 20, 1987 the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations signaled this commitment to sustainability when it lucidly stated, "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This means rethinking how we do things, including managing sports turf. [The inimitable Dr. Robert Carrow of the University of Georgia published an excellent overview of the issues, including the need for our industry to be proactive, in the July 2010 issue of this magazine, p. 18.]

We've entered a new age of stewardship in the world of sports. Rainwater recycling, solar panels, waterless toilets, recycling bins, LEED certification, and the MLB/NRDC initiative are just a few examples of this exciting new momentum. But as sports turf managers, we are the front line of facility operations. No field, no game. As we embrace a cleaner future, the Sports Turf Managers Association should represent the face of environmental stewardship in sports.

Following the lead of golf course management, we have embarked on the journey of honest reappraisal and systems overhaul. [I have addressed this process previously in *SportsTurf* articles detailing Environmental Turf Craft in October 2006 and January 2008 issues.] As stewards we've been busy learning to fine tune our operations to reduce waste and conserve resources. We are rethinking our N and P fertility programs and implementing other ecologically compatible management strategies to improve efficiency and prevent pollution. It's a labor of love and a work in progress with much to learn and lots to do.

ORGANIC FUNDAMENTALIST JIHAD

We have grown especially prudent in the use of pesticides. For ecological, social and/or economic reasons, there are a growing number of facilities now being managed with little or no pesticide use. To us as turf managers, the difference between "pesticide-free" and "almost pesticide-free" appears very slight. But to some activists and critics, the difference remains ideologically central.

In this modern age of extreme polarization, dialogue is needed more than ever but has

never been more difficult to initiate. Websites across cyber space are actively converting soccer moms into internet toxicologists, implying that children are being recklessly exposed to toxins. Regrettably, the general public's grasp of science continues to weaken, leaving them vulnerable to confusion and misinformation.

Consider the document called "Pesticides and Playing Fields," posted on the website of a prominent anti-pesticide group. This document, (ironically called a "fact sheet") states, "The typical soccer field is deluged with a mixture of poisons designed to kill fungus, weeds, and insects." Evidently, facts are of little significance in the jihad of some organic fundamentalists. It should be possible for the author to promote organics without slinging this kind of manure. We must work harder than ever to counteract this type of inflammatory deception. Ultimately, extremists impede progress.

We need to continue to set the record straight regarding our commitment and our commanding sense of responsibility as sports turf professionals (and as parents ourselves). As American humorist Will Rogers said, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there." We need to be actively involved in separating fact from fiction. As working professionals we recognize that, outside of utopia, compost tea won't solve every problem. Science and the sensible middle ground of IPM are under attack, but they're not dead. We have to stay visible, vocal and accessible as the genuine experts in the field of environmentally compatible turfgrass management.

We also need to be circumspect. Greenwashing (the use of environmental themes to whitewash environmental shortcomings) could create irreparable damage to our mission, integrity and image and must be guarded against. Too many industries are already succumbing to the sleazy temptation of misrepresenting their environmental achievements in order to win public approval. We also must not automatically call ourselves "environmentalists", convinced of our own green credentials, strictly because of our association with a product that is inherently green—grass. It's a title that needs to be earned.

Yes, science has demonstrated that turf provides obvious environmental benefits but our management decisions will determine if these benefits are realized, or negated by debits to the ecological balance sheet. We are responsible for finding the balance to maximize these benefits

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while minimizing the negative impacts from chemical and fertility mismanagement and yesterday's equipment and procedures. It may also be time for our industry to confront unrealistic, situation-inappropriate expectations. Major league perfection in Little League settings will not prove sustainable.

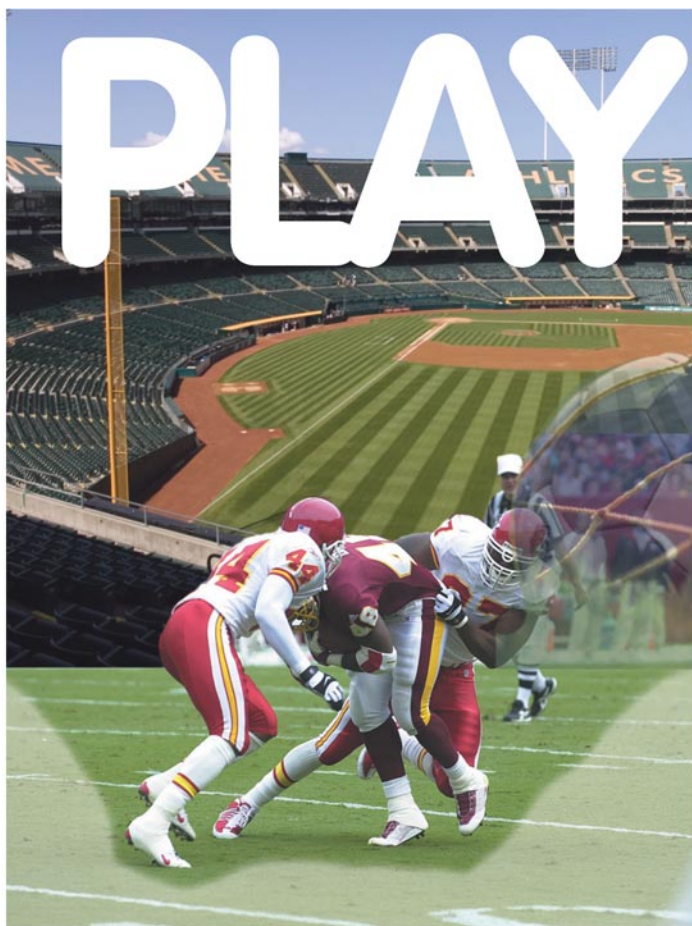
There are exciting developments and prospects to report about. The Global Sports Alliance (GSA) was very pleased to sign a Memorandum of Cooperation with the STMA in March 2009 indicating the two organizations' shared commitment to promote environmental stewardship among sports enthusiasts. To launch the agreement, a document providing useful guidelines for planning 'Green' sports events was collaboratively issued and is posted on the STMA's outstanding Resources/Environmental Stewardship page. [Kudos to STMA's Education Manager, Kristen Althouse, for devel-

oping this Resource section.]

Additionally, several sports turf managers are currently serving as GSA Team Captains, actively promoting environmental awareness and action in the world of sports and advertising their green accomplishments by flying GSA's Ecoflag. Also, in an important step this year, the STMA kicked off an Environmental Task Group to tackle the issue of sustainability and our role in environmental stewardship in the 21st century. And in another noteworthy development, there is growing interest in exploring collaboration with Audubon International and the potential for designing a sports facility program based on their enormously successful Cooperative Sanctuary Program. Stay tuned (and show your support at the state and national STMA levels).

Environmentalist Paul Hawken has written, "It has been said that environmentalism failed as a movement, or worse yet, died. It is the other way around. Everyone on earth will be an environmentalist in the not too distant future, driven there by necessity and experience." The fouling of air and water and the destruction of habitat and loss of biodiversity threatens all life on earth, including our own. Future generations will live with the choices we all make today. STMA members have an opportunity to lead by example. ■

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