

# How green is your green?

Golf resorts are doing their best to improve their environmental credentials, says **Simon Busch**

Can you see the point of golf. I mean, you can't have world leaders getting to know each other over a mud wrestle, can you? But golf is not innocent. It stands accused not only of crimes against fashion (Robin Williams once joked that it is the only sport in which white, middle-class men get to dress up as pimps) but also, increasingly, of crimes against nature. The undoubtedly unsensationalist Golf Course News reports that US golf courses are second only to fruit orchards in their degree of chemical saturation and that golf course superintendents are dropping like flies from non-Hodgkin lymphoma and brain cancer. (One assumes the latter has nothing else to do with the job.)

Never mind the humans, though: what about the rest of the ecosystem? Critics charge that golf courses are monocultures, steam-rolling complex habitats and devastating plant and animal species. The witches' brew of weedicides, fertilisers and pesticides used to manicure the turf, it is alleged, has a habit of leaching far beyond the course: such run-off has been blamed for wrecking coral reefs near golf resorts in the Caribbean, for example. Golf courses are also prodigiously thirsty, consuming, according to Progress magazine, between 1m and 3m litres of water a day just to keep that grass taut and glowing.

It is a rap sheet of which the developers of the Three Sisters Mountain Village, a residential golf resort deep in the Canadian Rockies, are all too aware. They have, James Scott, the planning manager at the resort, tells me, designed their courses with "a higher function in mind": their greens are not just greens but also double as part of a plan for conserving the rich alpine natural environment around them.

This sensitive approach begins with the basic structure of the course. Mountain golf courses conjure up images in my mind of chaps in plus fours driving (their balls) quixotically into the icy abyss – rather like the astronaut Alan Shepard teeing off into space and claiming the moon for golf in 1971.

But apparently there are two approaches to mountain course design: the brutalist one, making the earth

move for you; and that adopted by Three Sisters in the design of its course currently under construction, which involved assiduous "truing" of the terrain so that the layout, through a series of ascending benches, matched the gentle natural slope at the toe of the mountain.

Picture a majestic elk stepping cau-

tiously into a sun-dappled glade. Next picture a golf ball thwacking it between the eyes. It is a series of images Three Sisters would like to banish from your mind. The company's existing course, Stewart Creek, for example, incorporates broad "wildlife corridors" to facilitate the safe passage of the elk, deer and black and grizzly bears roaming the ver-

tiginous fir forests around the "corridors" on which resort residents play.

Nor does the development scythe through pristine wilderness. Much of the land for the new course is brown-field, a former coal mine, which has been reclaimed not, along with grizzly encounters, as some sort of extreme golf experience involving concealed

mineshafts but as part of the landscape of fairways, tee boxes and greens.

As to that guzzling question, Three Sisters uses mainly rainwater run-off for irrigation, distributed parsimoniously by means of a computer-controlled system. Harsh chemical treatment of the turf is spurned in favour, primarily, of liquid and organic fertilisers. Sean Kjemhus, who represents that imperilled guild of golf course superintendents at the resort, uses, fittingly enough, a medical metaphor: "We believe that by keeping the turf as healthy as possible there's no need for a sizeable amount of pesticides or chemicals. Much like ourselves, if we're healthy there's no need to take medicines. The turf is no different."

Much hotter but with a similar "sustainability" ethos is a luxurious residential and golf course development overlooking the Indian Ocean under way near the town of Pezula, in South Africa. Here, too, the fairways have been shaped to protect a bordering nature reserve and the turf is deep

green rye grass, to match the colour of the surrounding natural vegetation. As at Three Sisters, much of the development is on reclaimed land – a former forestry operation – and 85 per cent of the property will be devoted to partially replanted ironwood forest and tracts of the heather-like fynbos plants peculiar to this small belt of the Western Cape. Grysbok, baboons, antelope and duiker, along with golfers, will roam the land.

The planned residences at Pezula are to be no transplanted tacky-tacky little boxes, either, to borrow from the suburb-hating folk singer Pete Seeger. Owners-to-be may choose their own architects but, according to the development's promotional material, walls and roofs must be in "earth tones... from a prescribed palette of colours and glass must be non-reflective". Each home site is limited to a "disturbance area", beyond which the land will be rehabilitated to its natural state. Gardens are allowed but – no petunias – they must consist entirely of indigenous plants. I need hardly mention the biological sewage filtration.

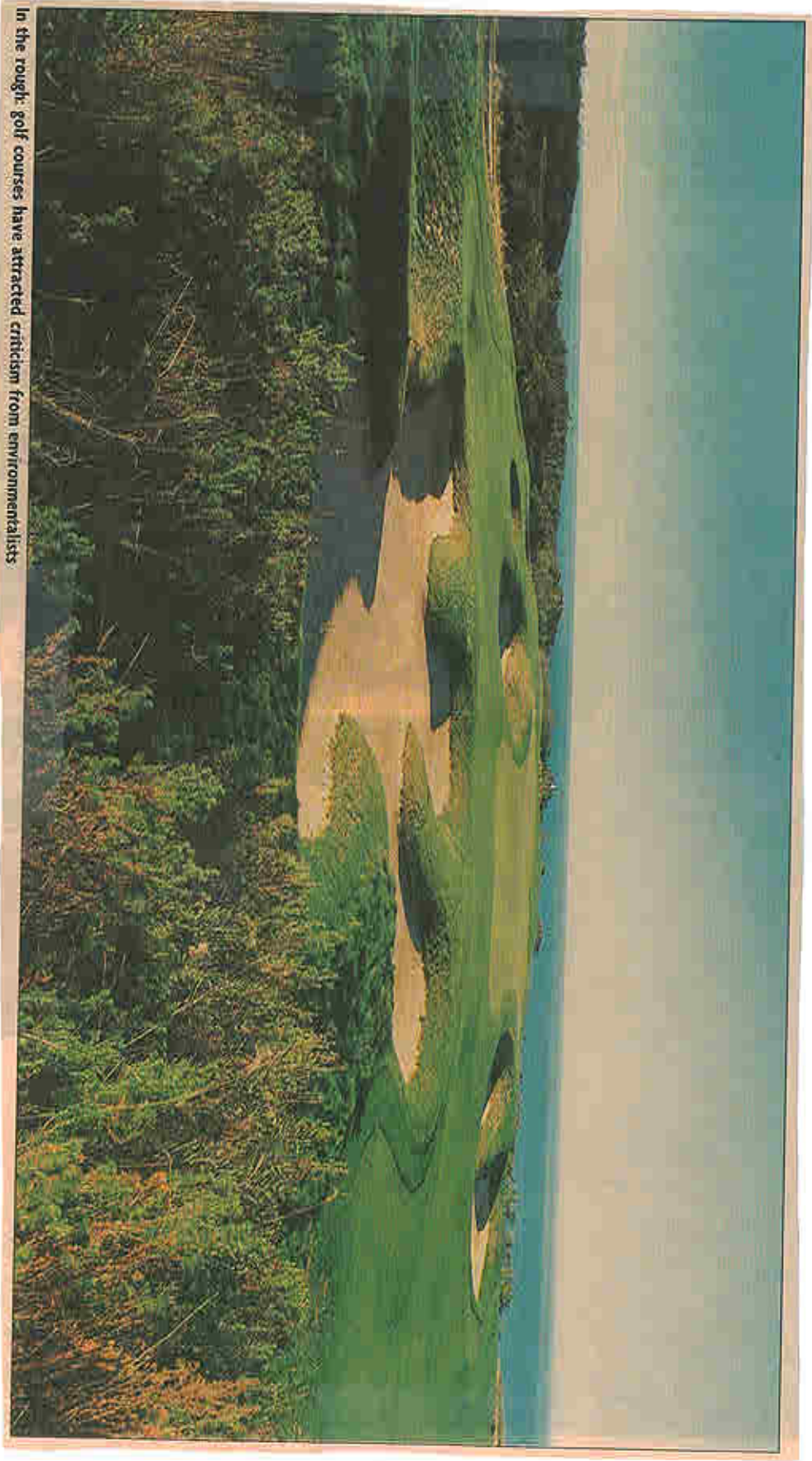
Not that any of these efforts would satisfy a group with the excellent title of the Global Anti-Golf Movement, which sees the game as ineluctably part of an elitist, environment-chomping network of real estate developers, sports equipment manufacturers and agribusiness. The notion of environmentally sustainable golf courses is, according to the group's manifesto, a contradiction, "a myth".

And you do have to ask whether the elk, if it could prefer, would prefer not to contend with a golf course at all. However, you do not have to subscribe to the anti-golfers' manifesto to realise that golf resorts and other sweeping developments are, as the world turns slowly into a giant crisp, only going to come under increasing pressure to do their bit for the environment.

The Three Sisters and Pezula resorts both claim to have gone "above and beyond the call of duty", as the health-conscious superintendent Sean Kjemhus puts it, in terms of conservation. And I believe them, if only because of another trend, beyond the regulatory one, that has clearly driven their development: the increasing saleability of sustainability.

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In the rough: golf courses have attracted criticism from environmentalists.