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How about bunking off for the day?

By GENEVIEVE FOX

Best lie low in the clubhouse tomorrow: it's World No Golf Day and the backlash is gathering strength. Genevieve Fox reports

The days of checked slacks and Pringle V-necks are numbered; the suburbs are quaking - for tomorrow is World No Golf Day.

No action is planned in the UK for the event's third anniversary; it is simply a marker in the diary, a means of informing a carefree, club- wielding public that behind every glistening new clubhouse, whether in the Algarve, Florida, Goa or Guildford, lies an environmentalist's nightmare of over-development, displacement of native peoples, erosion and water scarcity.

World No Golf Day, co-ordinated by the global Anti-Golf Movement, was dreamt up by Japanese farmer Gen Morita, and other environmentalists, in 1993 after Morita had discovered that the water he was using for his crops was polluted, coloured red by the pesticides used for the upkeep of golf-courses near his home in Kamogawa, south of Tokyo. Today, it is a global movement.

Tricia Barnett, co-ordinator of the UK pressure group Tourism Concern, insists that golf is proliferating at an alarming rate. "The building of golf-courses is not just about chopping down trees. It consumes vital resources of land and water. A golf-course now requires an average of 89 acres of land while a full-scale golf and hotel development takes up approximately 500 to 750 acres of land. In Third World countries, such as Malaysia and the Philippines, it is displacing people from their land."

Tourism Concern cites the case of those displaced from the Hawaiian island of Oahu in 1986, when Yasuo Yasodo, a Japanese national, bought the 1,200 acres of land on which the community had lived for 30 years. "We were evicted, our cattle stolen and killed, our houses bulldozed and our lives ruined - just so a Japanese foreign national could build a lavish golf-course complex," said an evicted Hawaiian farmer.

While the Scots were once happy playing on hilly pastures dotted with lakes and sandy hollows, today's courses are cut out of the landscape. "The American idea of golf-course development is favoured - flattening the environment, removing hills, and, in the case of one development in Malaysia, the top of mountains," says Ms Barnett.

Far Eastern businessmen will, it seems, play anywhere. In 1993, Korean and Taiwanese businessmen played golf on Vietnamese minefields, apparently unable to wait for the course to be finished and all the mines to be defused.

The golf backlash is not confined to the Third World. Many Brits, including the Council for the Protection of Rural England, are not happy about the transformation of precious land into money-spinning golf-

courses. The Bramshott Commoners Society in Liphook, Hampshire, has been fighting against the expansion of the Old Thorns golf-course by the London Kosaido company since 1988, and only last week, the Land is Ours campaign, a 400-strong land-rights movement, trespassed in order to plant a tree on the edge of St George's Hill golf-course, part of a luxury housing estate in Surrey, in a bid to reclaim privatised land.

The simulated, sanitised reality of today's golf complexes is part of today's theme-park culture. Maintaining lurid green turf in the summer months, especially in drought-ridden areas such as southern Spain which depend on golf tourism, is an expensive and labour-intensive operation. In professional tournaments, gleaming greens and brilliant blues are a priority.

Photographer Julia Parry worked in 1986 as a "divot" caddie at the US Masters, Augusta, Georgia, where additives were added to the artificial lakes and pools to make the water look bluer on television. "My job was to run around replacing the holes in the ground once the player had teed off," she says. "I had a bucket of green-coloured sand in case I couldn't find the original piece of turf. I had to make the course look pretty."

What else offends the anti-golf lobby (apart from the checked slacks, the loud shoes, the horrendous jumpers)?

The price, perhaps. A round now ranges from £55 for a single round at the world-famous Old Course at St Andrews to £100 for a round at the Championship course at the elitist Wentworth's in Surrey. To be sure of a round of golf you can pay anything £250 for a year's membership of the Royal and Ancient in St Andrews, to £22,700 for a debenture, plus £1,250 a year in subscriptions at £40m London Golf-club in Sevenoaks, Kent, designed by Jack Nicklaus - where perks include swinging with the likes of (until recently) Nick Leeson, Sean Connery and Sir Denis Thatcher. No wonder 85 per cent of the UK's courses are in danger of going bust, according to the Golf Research Group.

Increasingly, golf is less about leisure and homespun snobberies and more about money and corporate greed. Men talk business over pricey rounds of golf as an alternative to the working lunch. It is a kind of open- air Masonic ritual which spread beyond the confines of Scotland and the Home Counties with the property boom of the late Eighties when there was a proliferation of golf-courses nationwide.

In 1989, the Royal and Ancient golf-club in St Andrews recommended that in order to achieve a target of one golf-course for every 25,000 people in England, a further 700 courses would have to be built by the year 2000. There are now an estimated 25,000 golf-courses worldwide covering an area as large as Belgium. Three thousand of these are in the UK, 2,000 in Japan, while America, boasting 14,000 courses, gets the jackpot. Fifty million people play golf worldwide, more than 2 million of them here in the UK. Last year, more than 1 million people took golfing holidays in the UK.

Just a swing away from couch-potato land, golf does the sporting world a disservice. Sport is about the thrill of the human body being pushed to the limits. It is about marvelling at muscle in motion, about lycra - clad, glistening bodies. It is about suspense and the beauty of motion. The highlight in a round of golf is the moment that a tiny white ball travels from its tiny plastic perch along a card-flat surface into a neat hole - the so-called breathless excitement of a "hole in one".

The attraction of today's golf complexes is that the risk of exercise is kept to an absolute minimum: the player is always within striking distance of his hotel complex. Strangely, players still manage to have heart attacks on the course - Bing Crosby included. For golf fanatics, the likes of whom have their ashes sprinkled over their favourite links, this would be the ideal way to go.

In tournaments and competitions, it is the spectators not in possession of a golf periscope who do the running around, chasing their favourite player from one hole in the ground to the next. Unless, that is, you are one of the sitters, that risk-running breed who opt for a par 3 at the 17th and sit there all day.

Even golfing jargon makes the heart sink. It's all shanks and slices, birdies and bogeys. There is a challenge in "drawing the ball around a tree", sure defeat in "looping the club". In the anti-poetry of this sporting mini-world, the "biting pitch" is about as imaginative as it comes. There is no chanting, no camaraderie, only the mindless shouting of "shot!" the moment someone hits the ball - as though spectators are amazed that a pro can actually hit the ball in a straight line. There are no laps of honour, no throwing of sweaty victory shirts to adoring fans. The spectator's greatest trophy is pocketing a winning tee left in the turf.

"Golf," says Ms Parry, "is just not a spectator sport, it's an endurance test. It is based on the deeply masochistic notion that because you have stood around watching a hard round object flying through the sky, you've had fun."

All sports are governed by rules, and the golfing world prides itself on being a highly disciplined and self-regulatory specimen. But woe betide the man who walks into the Royal and Ancient without a jacket and tie.

As for women, any (male) player will tell you that male and female players enjoy equal rights. In "mixed-sex" clubs, the fairways are a free-for- all; female players are simply obliged to play mid-week rather than on a Saturday morning. Women's professional golf, meanwhile, gets no air time and less prize money. There is no rule against women becoming members of the Royal and Ancient, founded in 1774; no one's ever proposed one, that's all.

"We are a very democratic club," says club secretary Michael Bonallack. "If they are nice people and are keen on golf, they can be proposed and seconded. Obviously, they have to have a record showing they respect the traditions of the game."

And so World No Golf Day dawns. Sprinklers will doubtless be servicing the golf-courses of drought-ridden southern Spain, while in Thailand strictly under-26-year-old female caddies will be providing the usual "additional" services to foreign businessmen. The gleaming greens of the world's fairways are sadly deceiving.