

Case Study

Eagles for Golfers

BONITA SPRINGS, FLORIDA

As incredible as it may sound, there are some amateur golfers for whom eagles are not particularly rare. In fact, they may even come to expect them, when they play the 3rd hole of the Osprey Course at the Raptor Bay Golf Club in Bonita Springs, Florida. While you may imagine that these golfers surely must possess superior skills or experience, they usually just happen to be at the right place at the right time—to catch a glimpse of a pair of nesting bald eagles.

This encounter with America's national symbol is just one indication that Raptor Bay is going the extra mile when it comes to protecting wildlife habitat. The 18-hole Raymond Floyd-designed golf course—developed and managed in a joint partnership between WCI Communities, Inc. and Hyatt Hotels and Resorts—is located on 510 acres just alongside Estero Bay. This vital estuary and State-designated Aquatic Preserve is home to manatees, bottlenose dolphins, and many other forms of aquatic life.

Recognizing the fact that close proximity to such a special place could result in environmental impacts, the developers made a decision to pursue and attain a noteworthy designa-

tion: Raptor Bay Golf Club is the first resort golf course in the world to be certified by Audubon International as a "Gold Signature Sanctuary." The "Gold" certification is Audubon International's highest level of recognition in the Signature program, which carries with it a tangible acknowledgment of unquestioned leadership in environmental stewardship.

"A lot of folks might conclude that a Signature certification is evidence of a sincere commitment to protect the environment," says Audubon International's Nancy Richardson. But what many people may not realize is that doing what's required in order to be certified almost always leads to more cost-effective ways of developing and managing properties. **"Participants are saving money at the same time they are saving natural resources."**

Golf courses are particularly good candidates for the Signature Program because they feature diverse landscapes that can be managed to showcase natural plant communities and valuable wildlife habitats. In the case of Raptor Bay, that landscape consists of vegetated upland areas, along with freshwater and brackish water wetlands, Halfway Creek, listed as an "Outstanding Florida Waterway," runs along the eastern portion of the property. Forty-two percent of the site is an "eco-park," containing diverse natural habitats preserved in perpetuity under multiple levels of conservation easements.

A particularly innovative environmental approach at Raptor Bay is the use of "phytozones," 22 acres of small wetland pockets constructed to treat runoff from the golf course.

Heavily planted in native vegetation selected for the ability to take up and filter dissolved nutrients, these phytozones are formed by wide earthen berms which surround the lakes—in effect, creating a series of "baby lakes" or shallow pools. Pollutants carried by runoff settle into the phytozones, which serve to slow and detain stormwater before it flows into the main body of the lakes. The phytozones also provide habitat and feeding areas for wading birds and other wildlife. Many officials from State and Federal Regulatory agencies have toured these filtration marshes, which feature cutting-edge biotechnology designed to enhance stormwater treatment.

The commitment doesn't stop there, according to Richardson. "Whereas a typical golf course might have around 120 acres

of turfgrass," she explains, "Raptor Bay has only 60; that's half the watering requirement and half the amount of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides.

They follow fuel island guidelines, they recycle rinse water from washing lawnmowers and other equipment, they maintain separate pesticide storage. "A three-phase filtration system ensures that no water leaves the property that has not been thoroughly cleaned". And an Integrated Pest Management program ensures that treatment is conducted only after a certain threshold has been reached—and even then, only the affected area is treated, rather than the entire property."

Participating in the Signature Program has a definite economic value for participants, she says. "Property owners and developers tell us that their Signature status aids them in marketing their developments. Many managers and superintendents say they have reduced operating and maintenance costs as a result of the best management practices they've adopted. In a recent member survey, a full 96% of respondents indicated that they view their participation as a good business decision."

The experiences of those who play golf at Raptor Bay seem to bear this out, according to Richardson. "Management receives comment cards that reflect the fact that golfers appreciate the opportunity to play a course that places an emphasis on the protection of natural resources. From remarking on the natural beauty of the course to the visual effect of its having been there forever,"

it seems that the actual playing experience at Raptor Bay is enhanced by the approach they've taken to environmentally-responsible course design and management."

Most visitors will never fully understand the extent of the effort that goes into achieving the Gold Signature Sanctuary designation. From initial pre-design meetings to the final certification audit, the process typically takes around three years—and an annual review is required to maintain certification.

Finally, a strong environmental outreach and education component is part of the Signature Program. Designed to be enjoyed by guests of the Hyatt Coconut Point Resort and the Coconut Plantation Vacation Club, Raptor Bay is also accessible to the public. Signage along the course identifies the ecological characteristics of the area and yardage books contain a brief passage on each page about specific aspects of Raptor Bay's environment.

Richardson sums up the extraordinary vision embodied in a golf course like Raptor Bay. "It was Audubon International's goal, in working with the development team, to protect the environment while setting a new standard for resort golf courses. WCI Communities achieved an impressive blend of environmental responsibility and project development as they set aside conservation areas, created and enhanced lake habitat to manage and contain stormwater, removed exotic invasive vegetation, and provided wildlife corridors, setting a new standard for others to follow."

