

The Downfall of Golf

During an uncharacteristically cool summer night in Phoenix, Arizona, a quaint suburban neighborhood stirs. A middle-aged woman is woken from a deep sleep by the all-too-familiar sound of lawn sprinklers. The woman lives just a stone's throw (or rather, just a short chip) from the 7th hole of a posh country club golf course. To her chagrin, the relentless sprinklers have, for the past months, flooded her once pristine backyard. Her complaints have gone unheeded; thus, she decides to take matters into her own hands. She steps outside with her weapon of choice...ironically yet appropriately, a 9 iron. With the fervor of Tiger Woods approaching the 18th at Augusta, she takes an unhinged whack, taking the head off of one of the sprinklers. She then proceeds to destroy every other sprinkler in her view and returns to bed with a degree of satisfaction.

Her story is a microcosm for the battle that has engulfed the state of Arizona. For decades, there has been criticism surrounding the building of golf courses and their immense water usage.

While these concerns are legitimate, it seems as though the golf industry does more good than it does harm. Namely the water used helps create much needed revenue. However, under the surface there is an even greater issue that is seldom talked about--the golf industry is dying (or at least changing drastically). In the Grand Canyon State, the debate around water conservation, the golf industry, and the state's economic vitality are bound together.

Arizona is and has always been one of the driest states in this country (the second driest to be exact). The climate is that of a barren desert. Any precipitation is a rare occurrence throughout the state. Which is why it depends heavily on outside water sources like the Colorado River. It is also just the 14th most populated state. However, Arizona has the second highest number of golf courses, right behind Florida. These beautiful oases stick out among their parched surroundings. Yet, they suck resources from the already thirsty earth, almost more than any one agricultural user. So why does Arizona devote so much of its valuable and fleeting water to golf?

For some, the answer is simple: the golf industry and golf courses themselves generate positive effects in Arizona. Ed Gowan, who has been the head of the Arizona Golf Association since 1985, says, "From an economic standpoint, it's as big of an economic driver in this state as any other entity. It's the most efficient use of water creating dollars, more than any individual agricultural product."

Gowan isn't wrong. In fact, the golf industry creates over 4.1 billion dollars each year. While the golf courses themselves reap the benefits, these dollars are far more spread out than is apparent. Tax dollars benefit the state, maintenance companies grow significantly, course employees can put food on the table, and thousands flock to Arizona each year to play golf helping restaurants, hotels, and much more.

But what about the water? According to Ed Gowan, there is no issue here. In his own words “We’re the poster child of efficiency...When it comes to efficiency of water use, we’re the most efficient water user in this state.”

Indeed, parts of that statement are correct. In the early 80’s, the golf industry realized it needed to cut down on its water use. A law was enacted (and widely accepted by the industry) that made it policy to not use an excessive amount of drinkable water, as well as turf grass. Now, almost 40 years later, golf irrigation accounted for just 3% of the state’s groundwater and 1.1% of surface water use.

Contrary to what Gowan would probably want you to think, this does not tell the full story. The golf courses that existed before the 1980 Groundwater Management Act are still allowed to run with little to no oversight on water usage. Moreover, according to a US Geological Survey taken in 2010, Maricopa County (which includes Phoenix) golf courses used an average of 80 million gallons of water daily for irrigation. That was more than any other place in the country; and it was almost double the second worst offender. So while the golf industry in Arizona has been successful in cutting back on using drinkable water, it still uses excessive amounts of reclaimed water. You certainly will not see them on any posters anytime soon.

Because of this, there are many adversaries just as there are proponents of golf courses in Arizona. One of these adversaries is Mercedes Kindler, a water rights activist and grad student studying environmental engineering at Arizona State University. She said, “I don’t think it’s the

best use of the resources here. Golf courses are a large part of the water demand in Arizona, and specifically in Phoenix. I think that a better use would be something that's more accessible to everyone, like public parks or ball fields."

This isn't a new issue by any means. While snowbirds and those who come to Arizona specifically or in large part because of golf have no qualms, average residents with no ties to golf don't see eye to eye. The small city of Carefree, Arizona was anything but that in the 1980's. The state planned to build a large development and golf course for tournaments to be held on. However, residents were having none of it and protested by spray painting real estate and road signs "Desert Rape". Despite this, the golf course was still built. But this wasn't the end of the issue. Just a few years later, the protests arose as the developers used twice as much as all the residents combined annually. As is usually the case, the developers called the desert transformation "inevitable" and carried on.

Some see this issue as one that is soon to be forgotten. One man who is impartial, yet has unmatched insight on the subject is Gary Woodard. Woodard is a well respected hydrologist and water policy and economics consultant with over 35 years of experience working with courses in Arizona and throughout the desert. Woodard doesn't think the main issue with Arizona golf courses is water. He stated "If the only person who's walking on the turf is the person who's pushing the lawn mower, get rid of it. There's a lot of grass out there that's only used for decorative purposes. Golf courses aren't necessarily one of them. If it's actually going to be used then I think it's worth it. Just don't over irrigate.

According to Woodard, last year the city of Tucson used the same amount of water as it did in 1974 despite a 70% population increase. In his estimation, everyone in the state is doing what they can to conserve water and are becoming extremely efficient, even golf courses. Woodard instead thinks that there is another storm on the horizon for the golf industry, both nationally and in Arizona. He said “After the housing market imploded, by 2009 or 2010, you had no new courses being built nationwide, and you had a handful of courses closing...The number of golfers has been declining for years, and so has the number of rounds played, so the whole golf industry is in a bit of a crisis.”

One man, Ed Gowan does not agree with this hypothesis. “The theory that golf is in some kind of a downturn nationwide, and that rounds are down just isn't the case” he said sharply. He said the issue was that “In the early 90’s and 2000’s, the golf courses here were overbuilt. Some of them were enveloped by developing cities and some were sold off because the land became so valuable. That’s why some courses have shut down here” said Gowan.

Alas, golf's decline is a very real issue for a number of reasons. The first and most concerning is demographics. In 2014, a Nielsen study found that 63% of the PGA’s television audience was above the age of 55. Even worse, according to the Washington Post, the number of golf players between ages 18-30 is down 35% in the last decade. The next issue is race. 87% of viewers during the Nielsen study were white. Golf is by far the least diverse sport in terms of viewership and the athletes themselves. The last issue is golf is a sport for affluent people. As the wage gap

has widened, and the middle class has disappeared in this country, so has golfs main demographic. According to the National Golf Foundation, the number of golfers in the US has dropped from 30 million to 24.1 million in the last 10 years. All these factors spell a slow demise of golf.

Interestingly enough, if this trend continues, it wouldn't be all bad. It might even help in some ways. According to Gary Woodard “Golf has always been a target of environmentalists. But I think right now the trends are kind of solving the problem themselves. You don’t have to regulate away golf, if the popularity of golf continues to drop. So we might actually dodge a really bloody policy war”.

The debate about the importance of golf is one that is as old as the sport itself in Arizona. As the state continues to get drier and drier, the discussion will continue. The state must evaluate what is really important as it tries to save every drop of water possible. But, some experts see this as an issue that will fall by the wasteside as golfs viewers and players are quite literally dying off. If golf is truly heading towards the metaphorical iceberg, Arizona will see an incredible amount of change, and will have to embrace it. Shifting demographics will have a large impact on both the natural world and the golf world. As this transformation commences, the discussion will shift to what is the best use of these old courses to create a more inclusive community.

