Organic golf ‘on the fringe’: the potential and challenges of a chemical-free golf alternative

Throughout this book we have described responses to golf-related environmental problems that are intended to ‘alter’ golf – that is, responses intended to revise and improve environment-related practices within the golf industry. For the most part, the ‘alter-golf’ responses we highlighted were led by mainstream golf industry members and their affiliates. We labelled these particular changes to golf course maintenance and construction ‘light green’ as a way of highlighting that these changes are ultimately moderate responses to environmental issues, based as they are around the ‘latest science’, around technology-driven strategies for dealing with environmental problems, and on the view that chemicals are still useful and necessary so long as they are used responsibly. Put another way, these strategies for making golf ‘greener’ are ultimately industry-friendly, do not require a radical shift in business practices, and require only modest and measured changes to the way that golf’s relationship with the environment is perceived. In the last chapter we outlined how some individuals and groups have fully rejected this responsible turn.

To be sure, the light-greening of golf is, on the one hand, innovative and in many respects progressive in its attempts to make golf more environmentally friendly. On the other hand, we have pointed to problems with being overly reliant on the ‘latest science’ when making decisions about synthetic chemical use, recognizing that such an approach has important limitations when it comes to negotiating necessary and unnecessary health- and environment-related risks. Across our analysis to this point there is a question as to why, if golf is considered a crucial leisure and tourism activity (i.e. economically important and, perhaps ironically, health-promoting), other non-chemical alternatives are not being pursued with the same vigour as the ‘light-green’ solutions described to this point.

This chapter is about just this sort alternative to the mainstream ‘light-green’ turn – an alter-golf response that both values golf and, generally speaking, seeks to excise synthetic chemicals. This more radical alter-golf approach – as compared to
the moderate approaches adopted by industry members – is known as ‘organic golf’. Below, we describe what organic golf is and why we think it is, in fact, a more radical alternative to even the most progressive industry-led responses to environmental problems. We also address questions about why this alternative to more chemical-intensive forms of golf is not being pursued as vigorously as it might be. Organic golf, for all its potential, remains on the industry’s ‘fringe’.

This chapter is specifically organized into the following sections. First, we define organic golf and offer an overview of approaches to and basic techniques for maintaining an organic golf course. Following this, we discuss the problems with, merits of, and feasibility of organic golf. In the process, we engage with key debates about organic golf that in some ways extend to debates about the organic movement in general. The next part of the chapter includes an extended discussion of the various (possible) reasons that the organic golf movement has not made more progress. Unlike the environmental feasibility issues outlined earlier in the chapter, this section focuses especially on sociological explanations for the organic golf ‘movement’s’ overall lack of success to date. Included here is a discussion of the incentive systems that underlie decision-making by governments and the behaviours of golf industry members and chemical industry members – as well as challenges faced by (and contradictions within) the organic golf movement itself. We conclude by arguing that organic golf is one of the more intriguing solutions to golf-related environmental problems that we came across in our research because it embodies perspectives and practices that are both ‘light green’ and ‘dark green’ in their inclination. That is to say, proponents of organic golf embrace certain kinds of science and technology-driven responses to environmental problems while at the same time championing a more radical anti-chemical stance and a somewhat alternative view of what counts as an acceptable golf course aesthetic. Our commentary on this will highlight one of the main arguments we offer in the final chapter of this book – an argument for remaining open to a diversity of options when it comes to golf’s environmental future.

To help us carry out these steps, we draw on interviews we conducted with key figures at two organic golf courses – one on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, Canada and one in the town of Royston (near Cambridge) in the United Kingdom. Our discussion herein is also informed by published information about organics and golf, online interviews with organic golf advocates, and presentations made available to the public pertaining to the practice of maintaining an organic course. Our particular focus when looking at courses apart from those we visited is the renowned Vineyard (organic) Golf Club near
Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, USA. The Vineyard has received a great deal of publicity, at least partly because US President Barack Obama has been known to play there. Vineyard's course superintendent, Jeff Carlson, is a noteworthy figure too – one who is both highly regarded in the mainstream golf industry (where light-green ideas and practices prevail) but is also working at the industry's dark-green periphery by way of his involvement with organic golf.

What is organic golf?

In exploring the world of organic golf, we came across a range of views on what it means to be an authentically ‘organic’ golf course in the first place. The most straightforward definition of an organic golf course is a course that does not use “a single synthetic pesticide, fertilizer, herbicide or other artificial chemical treatment” (Pennington, 2010). Those we interviewed who work at organic golf courses went beyond this standard definition, however, suggesting that chemical-free course maintenance is only one aspect of organic care. As the superintendent at Blackburn Golf Course on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia explained:

For me, organics mean something wholly derivative of a natural process … of a non-chemical, non-synthesized basis … [But] for me, it's not just soil and grasses, it's everything. I mean it’s from attitude and thinking to products that we have here to [our] building to everything that we do, all the processes and operations … There's no use going halfway, I think if you're going to go that way, you may as well go that whole, you know, as natural as possible. (Personal interview, September 2011)

This holistic vision of organic maintenance is in turn realized in many ways:

From recycling to, we try to go as much electric as we can, try to stay away from petroleum products. There's a lot of little things that we do. Say downed trees for instance. We put vegetable oil in the chainsaws to cut up the branches and whatnot. We try to take all the branches that have come down and we chip them and recycle them back into the golf course and pathways and we try and, it's almost like a cycle, trying to keep everything healthy and hand it off to another generation where it's [in a] a great place and healthy. (Personal interview, September 2011)

Similar to our interviewee at Blackburn Meadows, one of the employees we spoke with at New Malton organic golf course in the UK saw the anti-chemical
side of organic golf as part of a broader effort to be environmentally and (in this case) socially sustainable:

Organic courses [involve] purely no chemicals whatsoever … [But organic, for us, also means] self-sufficiency, it’s about creating a good junior section, allowing everyone to play golf whether you’re male, female, junior, disabled, whatever, you know. (Personal interview, July 2012)

Another New Malton employee noted the role that golf courses can play as wildlife sanctuaries:

Ecology-wise, it doesn’t matter what you think about the organics, whether you believe in it, or whether you believe it works, the ecology side of it, you can do it on any golf course. I’m not saying you can go on the scale we’ve gone to, because we have got acres and acres for the wildlife. See those areas there [points to an area on the course] are fantastic for wildlife. Not every golf course can do that – they haven’t got the spare land to do it. But every hole [on most courses] has an area where the golfers don’t have to go, or won’t go. And what I’m saying to the greenkeepers is, keep that back for the wildlife. And at the end of the day, it’s about sustainability, because if they’re not going to look after that area, they’re not gonna cut it down every week … they’re not using diesel, they’re not wearing the machinery out and that relieves them to go out and do something else. They can then look after the greens for an extra half hour [rather] than basically cutting down grass, which is just destroying habitat for wildlife. So, the benefits are incredible, but it’s getting a message through and this is the best way of doing it. (Personal interview, July 2012)

Taken together, this is indeed a loose assemblage of values and practices. In constructing a sense of what organic means, ‘chemical-free’ maintenance fits together with recycling, alternative energy, wildlife conservation, and, for New Malton, even inclusivity in terms of membership. This is not unlike how the new social movements we saw in the last chapter were quite diverse in their intentions and goals.

Underlying the organic golf movement – and we use the term ‘movement’ loosely, noting that the organic golf practitioners we identified in our research were not actively working together as part of an organized collective – is the idea that synthetic chemicals pose unnecessary risks, and that these risks can be avoided by those working within the golf industry. Jeff Carlson of the Vineyard (organic) Golf Club makes this point explicitly during an interview published in *Golf Digest* (Barton, 2008). His opinion here is noteworthy in that Carlson has expressed openness to both the limited uses of synthetic chemicals (for reasons outlined below), and to the idea that pesticides can be used safely.
Carlson has thus effectively moved between lighter and darker-green positions. Still, on this occasion, when asked, “If pesticides are safe, why is there a movement to use less of them?” Carlson outlined the risks accompanying any form of chemical use:

I guess because of that absolute – because we don’t know they’re absolutely OK. Because I was told in the 1970s that mercury-based fungicides were safe. So, they were wrong. And maybe there are some pesticides out there that aren’t good. (Barton, 2008)

This perspective aligns with our own critical reflections from the end of Chapter 5, in which we noted historical contradictions in the golf industry’s defence of chemical applications. Golf industry representatives, we said at the time, have defended chemicals almost as a default position, even though such a stance looks misguided in the light of hindsight for many once-popular chemicals. Here Carlson is likewise outlining the rationale for a more precautionary approach.

Techniques and products for ‘doing’ organic golf

Although the techniques and products used to manage organic golf courses vary and are of course complex, we will offer a brief overview of some particularly noteworthy practices. The main aim of this section, however, is not to exhaustively describe the range of organic course management techniques that are available to those inclined to use them. Instead, our goal is to demonstrate that alternative/organic techniques are being used and developed on an ongoing basis, and to point out that although organic golf remains a work in progress, it certainly seems to be a potentially viable alternative.

With this background, then, we found that those who manage organic courses often referred to both the cultural practices that are used to maintain courses and the particular organic inputs used to deal with turfgrass-related problems. Below we identify and describe two key cultural practices:

- **Focusing on drainage and dew accumulation on courses.** This means getting rid of excess sitting water, which can lead to course damage and/or plant/insect infestation (and ice formation on courses in the winter). Choosing sites for golf courses where good drainage is possible is key here. Grass cutting and running rollers over the greens early in the morning are also useful practices.
Part IV: The dark-greening of golf

for reducing sitting dew. In a presentation on the topic, Jeff Carlson mentioned ‘whipping’ greens (i.e. manually taking the dew off of greens) along with the use of wetting agents, which we discuss further below. (Carlson, 2010)

• Managing micro-climates. This means attending to the unique challenges associated with having different temperature zones on a course – a challenge linked to the mix of shade and sun exposure in different areas. Carlson noted how trees and shade are a source of problems like pythium (a.k.a. ‘root rot’). He goes so far to as to suggest that the an ideal course has no trees because tree-related problems are so difficult to manage organically. (Carlson, 2010)

Other things to take into account when developing and/or maintaining an organic course include: choosing grasses that are easiest to maintain organically (according to Carlson, fescue and bentgrass are good, and the commonly used blue grass is problematic); having a compact course layout, which helps minimize overall inputs into the course; fertilizing enough to keep grasses healthy and vigorous (recognizing that too much or too little fertilizer puts grasses at risk); monitoring the pH levels of soils (high and low levels are indicators of risk); hand weeding and hand watering (instead of using inputs to kill weeds); and attending to areas of the golf course where it is not necessary to cut grass as often (e.g. where golf balls are rarely hit). In these ways, organic golf provision ideally begins from course design and follows all the way through to particular maintenance practices. The practices outlined above in many cases veer away from trends that, over time, became commonplace in the golf industry (acknowledging that some also align with the principles of ‘responsible golf’, as per earlier chapters). Eschewing chemicals is the most obvious example of this. The making of compact courses is another case in point. As we saw in earlier chapters, improvements in equipment over time, among other trends, have helped expand golf’s occupation of land.

In addition to these sorts of on-course cultural practices, those managing organic golf courses also emphasized the need for tolerance of some visual on-course imperfections – and that education for golfers who play organic courses is needed to foster this tolerance. Carlson suggested that his goal is to maintain a high level of ‘playability’ on the course while (hopefully) changing the way that golfers ‘see’ courses – since visual imperfections are inevitable with organic care (Carlson, 2010). That said, the organic golf managers that we studied (through our interviews and document analyses) also recounted their efforts to maintain courses that were essentially indistinguishable from one treated with synthetic chemicals. Organic courses from this perspective should have no
trouble competing in the crowded golf marketplace. As one of our interviewees from New Malton noted:

The biggest compliment someone, a non-believer, can give you is [to] come in and say, “Actually, I enjoyed the course, that was good” and you say, “actually, we’re organic, we use no chemicals,” and they say, “really! Oh I didn’t know that.” And that is a massive compliment because they’re comparing us with other golf courses that can use chemicals, who’ve got a massive advantage. (Personal interview, July 2012)

The cultural practices noted above are carried out in addition to the application of organic turfgrass products that are intended to eliminate diseases and infestations and promote healthy growth. One of the main inputs are organic ‘wetting agents’, aimed at helping the absorption of water into the turf, thus avoiding the above-noted problems of dew and sitting water. Carlson (2010) referred to the use of hot water and foam to control crabgrass and other weeds – which is applied using machinery developed to deliver “super-heated water from a boom or spray nozzle” (Riley, 1995: 9). As part of his discussion of wetting agents and organic inputs, Carlson also referred to experiments he is running with the support of turfgrass researcher Dr Frank Rossi of Columbia University, which focus on matters such as the alteration of potassium and nitrogen inputs as a way of dealing with turfgrass problems (Carlson, 2010). Elsewhere, the owner of the (now defunct) Grand Forks organic course in Grand Forks, British Columbia, owned and maintained by a husband and wife team who had previously run an organic vineyard in Switzerland, described their use of “organic fertilizer such as bone meal, blood meal, kelp, humate, composted turkey manure and so on”, and their application of rock glacial dust to deal with grub worms (Ziemer, 2009). Our interviewees at both New Malton Golf Club and Blackburn Meadows were similarly inclined towards experimentation in fertilizing and in dealing with turfgrass-related challenges.

The inputs described above can also be complemented by the application of organic pesticides available on the market for turfgrass maintenance. The approved organic products Carlson uses and referred to in his presentation at the University of Guelph’s Turfgrass Institute include applications with the brand names ‘Civitas’, ‘Spotless’, ‘Ecoguard’, ‘Rhapsody’, and ‘Safe-Tea’ (compost tea). Looking closer at the first of these, Civitas was formulated by Petro Canada – itself a Suncor Energy business, with Suncor said to be the first company to develop Canada’s oil sands (Suncor Energy Inc., n.d.a). The aim with Civitas is evidently to strengthen turf, thus preventing insects and pathogens.
from taking hold in a host plant to begin with (i.e. as opposed to killing off fungus directly). This much was said in a press release from 2009 announcing Civitas’ unveiling: “Unlike traditional chemical fungicides, CIVITAS is a synthetic isoparaffin-based product that works to prime the turf’s genes, stimulate its natural defences and kill or inhibit fungal diseases” (Suncor Energy Inc., 2009; also see Suncor Energy Inc., n.d.b; GCSAA, n.d.g). The upshot for proponents of Civitas is that the product can in turn guard against turf diseases such as anthracnose, dollar spot, and brown patch, among others, while also protecting against insects such as cutworms and annual bluegrass weevils (Suncor Energy Inc., n.d.b). Both Civitas and the more recent product Civitas One are Organic Materials Review Institute Listed®, meaning they have been reviewed against organic standards and deemed acceptable by the Institute (see http://www.omri.org; also see Golfdom Staff, 2013). Moreover, and of significance to the wider themes of *The Greening of Golf*, Civitas was said to be the ‘technological breakthrough’ that golf superintendents have been waiting for upon its release. A company spokesperson added: “The science behind our product is revolutionary” (Suncor Energy Inc., 2009). Here organic golf veers into the territory of ecological modernization (EM), replete as EM is with faith in science and technology in solving environmental problems (see Chapter 2). Hence our above claim that organic golf, depending on how it is practised, can potentially blend both lighter- and darker-green sensibilities.

**Different understandings of the ‘organic applications’ approach**

Although we (unsurprisingly) found that those working on organic golf courses were generally committed to the chemical-free principles that underlie organic golf, there were different views on how strictly organic principles should be followed. On one side, those we spoke with at Blackburn Meadows and New Malton seemed especially committed to a strict application of organic principles (i.e. a ‘no synthetic chemicals, no matter what’ philosophy). One of our interviewees at Blackburn illuminated this position in suggesting that chemical-intensive golf is simply not feasible going forward: “most mainstream golf courses cannot continue to operate the way they are, just pumping chemicals underneath their soils, leaching it into the groundwater.” (Personal interview, September 2011)

By contrast, Jeff Carlson has suggested that environmentally friendly golf course maintenance is ultimately about the activities of superintendents, and
not just the ingredients used on courses. Carlson’s point, which he emphasized in the presentation at Guelph’s Turfgrass Institute mentioned earlier, is that the haphazard use of organic ingredients can also cause environment- and health-related problems. ‘Natural’ (i.e. non-synthetic) inputs can be poisonous, for example, meaning problems can ensue even when organic ingredients are put in the hands of non-experts (Carlson, 2010). These observations sit alongside Carlson’s expressed view that it is ‘virtually impossible’ for pesticides to affect groundwater (contra the above comments from our Blackburn interviewee). Carlson has also reflected fondly on the effectiveness of chemicals in the mainstream golf industry: “I terribly miss the opportunity to be able to use an insecticide occasionally. Right now I would sell my soul for a one-time application of a pre-emergent weed control” (Barton, 2008). All told, then, and even though Carlson is himself an organic golf practitioner and advocate, his philosophy on course maintenance in general evidently cannot be distilled down to ‘no synthetic chemicals, no matter what’.

Furthermore, and recognizing that chemical companies have identified the need to cater to the organic market and attempted to create products that have been approved as ‘organic’, it appears that those in the organic golf movement are facing questions about what can be counted as organic. As the owner of Blackburn Meadows notes:

We have customers that as soon as they hear organic, they know [it means] no chemicals … But when you talk to industry people, fertilizer reps or whoever else, they want to know to what step of organic we’re talking about, because there are those intermediate organic products and different practices. Yes, [all products] came from the earth one way or another and they’re put together, so would you consider that organic? Well no, if they’re changed to see better results and that sort of thing, then no, they’re not necessarily organic. (Personal interview, September 2011)

While there is at least some agreement on what ‘counts’ as an organic golf course, it would be a stretch to suggest that anything resembling an organized organic golf ‘movement’ currently exists – and it is important to acknowledge here that contradictions around organic golf itself are ever present. As Carlson (2010) admits in his Guelph lecture, it is worth considering whether the costs associated with doing organic work – which, at times, require the construction and frequent usage of the new equipment – may ironically lead to an especially large environmental footprint, all in the name of maintaining an organic golf course. These are the same sorts of questions that have been asked for years of those producing organic foods and other products.
We conclude this section by highlighting an intriguing metaphor offered by the superintendent at Blackburn Meadows Golf Club to distinguish the approach taken by his course to organic golf from those managing non-organic golf courses. He used the metaphor of medicine, distinguishing his own holistic (or ‘naturopathic’) approach from the perceived ‘pharmaceutical’ approach at the industry’s core. As he stated:

The last fifty years, [we] have been educated that, “ok, this is what we do, this pasture, this weed, we apply this”. It’s like a doctor now, you know? All you’ve got is this element, you’ve got to use this pill, [in an] encyclopaedia, right, of pharmacology and go from there. Versus a naturopath, I mean we’re the naturopath of golf courses. I look at it in a holistic manner and that’s an analogy. (Personal interview, September 2011)

Of course, given the various approaches to and reasons for managing organic golf courses, it is not clear that this naturopathic metaphor would be adopted by other organic golf practitioners. Conversely, those committed to the sustainability methods associated with IPM might also identify with a holistic approach, noting that IPM also includes a range of cultural as well as chemical course management practices. Still, the naturopathic metaphor is intriguing as a way of highlighting the ‘natural’ and system-focused emphasis of at least some organic golf advocates. As we have seen, the military metaphor – the ‘war’ on pests – of the ‘pro-golf’ era eventually gave way to medical imagery: pesticides have at times been seen as medicine for the earth. In the Blackburn Meadows view, this ‘medicine’ can be relied on too heavily. Hence the need for a different ‘alter-golf’ solution.

Reflections on organic practices: considerations, debates, and hope

So far, we have described some of the practices and perceptions of those who manage organic golf courses and those who have a stake in organic golf’s success. We highlighted a range of positions and reflected on some of the ambiguities of the ‘organic movement’ generally. Through our overview, a few important and stable themes emerged, including:

• *That, according to superintendents who use them, organic methods ‘work’.*

Moreover, as resources have been invested in testing and utilizing organic
methods, further successes have been and continue to be attained. According to Carlson (2010), they especially work when it comes to the playability of golf courses.

- **That the level and type of success with organic management is context-dependent.** That is to say, it was uniformly recognized that organic management strategies are ‘more or less’ effective depending on many factors. These include factors related to the golf course in question itself, such as the extent to which the course has been treated with synthetic chemicals in the past and the types of grasses it features. But broader circumstances are important here too. The Vineyard organic course, for example, is primarily set in a moderate climate more favourable to organic golf than places experiencing weather extremes. Those behind the course also appear to have had greater resources at their disposal than those working at other organic sites. Maybe most significantly of all, there was heavy input from the local community, which required the course to be organic from the very outset.

- **That continuing to develop organic management techniques – and organic courses – requires time, further experimentation, and investment.** The time factor here is key, as the natural defences of grasses need time to redevelop on golf courses where synthetic pesticides have been used previously. In the same way, some applications and methods just will not work immediately. This is not to say that these methods/applications are faulty, but it does mean that the desired results may not be evident right away for reasons that are not always apparent – and that time for experimentation is important. Furthermore, and given the need for more ‘on-course’ work by superintendents and workers to maintain organic courses, such courses often require long hours of intensive labour.

- **That strict regulation of chemical usage can be helpful for superintendents attempting to implement a successful organic programme.** That is to say, as superintendents face pressures to maintain pristine golf courses, it would seem that in a regulated environment – where the use of organic methods that may not have immediate impacts on disease, weeds, and pests – golfers (and undoubtedly course owners who would not voluntarily ‘go organic’) may be more patient with and perhaps supportive of superintendents efforts, struggles, and successes. Jeff Carlson (2010) indicated that this was his experience when dealing with golfers at the highly regulated Vineyard golf course – golfers who were remarkably patient with the efforts of his course maintenance team when they understood the team’s goals and tactics.
In sum then, it seems that organic golf is, technically speaking, a plausible option for course owners/superintendents. There is clear evidence that organic methods work – and also that the potential of organic golf, in terms of the knowledge and products needed to effectively manage organic courses, is only beginning to be realized. While it is unclear how golfers would respond to the aesthetic and playability adaptations that would be required of them in an organic-only environment, we would venture to suggest golfers might be quite open to such changes – especially in light of the long tradition of links-style golf that is played in more rugged conditions.

Moreover, Jeff Carlson’s (2010) view that the regulations on his course were enabling in the sense that golfers became more tolerant of some variable course conditions and educated about the benefits of organic golf is instructive here as well. Namely, Carlson’s experience is relevant as we consider what golfers ‘could do’ if public and environmental health concerns were widely known, and if organic golf was widely available (and mandated). In the same way, mandating ‘organic-only’ golf courses would undoubtedly inspire the development of a culture of more environmentally knowledgeable, innovative, and motivated course owners and superintendents. In fact, Carlson has specifically suggested that superintendents would likely be quite supportive of a move towards organic course management. As he states in an interview with Golf Digest:

> Superintendents would be totally supportive of it. I’ve noticed a tremendous interest in managing golf courses more organically, especially among younger superintendents. They’d do a great job. The golf courses would be terrific, but they’d have some visual blemishes. (Barton, 2008)

In citing Carlson in this way, we do of course recognize that it is presently not viable for many course owners to ‘go organic’ because the investment and time needed to make organic golf work might be too financially risky. Part of the problem is that ‘going organic’ is currently optional, which means that adopting organic methods requires investments that non-organic competitors do not have to deal with, making the endeavour especially risky in a competitive leisure industry.

On reflection then, and remembering the various risks associated with pesticides outlined in Chapter 1, we find it curious that organic golf is not taken more seriously as an option and goal for those responsible for environmental and public health-related issues. Put simply, and addressing one of the overarching questions of this book, if organic golf is generally considered to be less impactful/risky’ than ‘responsible’ golf, the question arises as to why organic
Organic golf ‘on the fringe’

189

Why hasn’t organic golf caught on?
Barriers and challenges

It is always difficult to know for sure why a particular set of values or practices catch on, and others do not. Acknowledging this, we think in this case there are identifiable barriers, challenges, and circumstances that make it very difficult for pro-organic golf advocates to make the sort of progress that would be needed for an organic golf movement to thrive or become the status quo.

Time, money and Augusta National syndrome

According to our interviews with superintendents working at Audubon-certified golf courses – that is, those receiving external accreditation for their attentiveness to environmental issues, though still working within the ‘responsible golf’ paradigm (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7) – the main barrier to going organic is the time and cost associated with maintaining a course using organic methods. The following comment from an assistant superintendent at an Audubon-certified course in British Columbia speaks to this: “I’d like to go organic, but for one, it’s very expensive. Organic products don’t offer a lot of nutrients usually. They’re very low analysis so you have to use a lot more of them, which increases the cost” (Personal interview, October 2011).

This seems straightforward, though assessing the comment in full requires attention to the set of expectations that superintendents are faced with, specifically over the visual aesthetic and perceived playability of their courses. We are of course referring here, again, to the Augusta National ideal – the perhaps
unrealistic standard set by the course that hosts the annual Masters tournament. Jeff Carlson makes this point in his interview in *Golf Digest*, recounting a story whereby a tee box he was assessing measured near perfectly in terms of insect damage and disease. The visual appearance of the tee, however, would suggest to an outsider that the course superintendent could be fired for poor performance. Carlson’s point is that the standard of success for a golf course is extremely high; he names Augusta National specifically in recounting this story (see Barton, 2008).

To be sure, not all courses are the same, and many courses owners and superintendents will have differing expectations depending on their target market, competition, and resources. Still, it is not a stretch to suggest that for many golf course superintendents, and for seemingly most of those working on higher-end tourist-oriented courses, this expectation is standard.

*The organic golf movement is still ‘finding its voice’*

As we noted in the previous chapter, there are various reasons that some social movements succeed and others fail. It is similarly important to acknowledge that it can take time for movements that eventually become successful to ‘find their voice’ – to mobilize the right kind and right amount of resources, at the right moment, and in the right circumstances. Social historian Eric Hobsbawn made a similar point many years ago, when describing how particular groups are ‘pre-political’, referring to the idea that those working in a movement often need time to “find a language to express themselves and their concerns, to prepare themselves for active engagement with politics” (Wilson, 2012b: 85). Of course, even if a movement becomes more organized, this does not ensure that it will achieve its goals, or that it will avoid internal divisions that inhibit its success. Still, to become more organized means that particular steps need be taken.

It was clear from our research that the organic golf movement is still ‘finding its voice’ in the sense that those engaged in organic care – the superintendents and course owners who are taking leadership through local course management activities – have not banded together and have not articulated or promoted any kind of unified vision. This is not to say that this will not happen or that progress has been totally elusive to date. In fact, those we interviewed expressed an interest in moving ahead with a collective vision of organic golf at some point. They have also taken some steps towards promoting organic golf to public audiences. The following comments are evidence of this:
I definitely feel like we’re leaders in this and that we have to continue to lead and educate as well. There’s just been a lot on the plate this year but in the year or two to come we’d like to integrate more with, and connect more with other golf courses and recreation, on a similar path. We have to, it’s only going to help everyone and help ourselves and increase our knowledge base. (Owner, Blackburn Meadows Golf Club; Personal interview, September 2011)

In the last 12 years there’s been numerous occasions that we’ve been featured in media or [been] of interest for magazines and things like that. I think it’s important for people to hear once in a while, you know, that there’s a golf course doing this sort of thing. So yeah, I think we are part of the organic movement and have established ourselves in the industry that way, with certain groups and certain people in the golf course maintenance industry … they know what we’re all about and they know not to push things they shouldn’t on us and that’s, that’s what we want to see. We don’t want someone coming and pushing chemicals on us, we want them to know that we are organic and we’re standing strong on that and so in that fashion. Yes, we are I’d say a strong part of that movement. (Superintendent, Blackburn Meadows Golf Club; Personal interview, September 2011)

The suggestion here that the organic work taking place at Blackburn Meadows is part of the broader organic movement is certainly relevant in the sense that this broader movement might be a resource to help lend credibility to and facilitate the growth of organic golf. Process-wise, this is akin in many respects to the linkages that local anti-golf resistance movements attempted to forge with global environmental and human rights-related movements – and, at times, with the far-reaching Global Anti-Golf Movement as well. It is relevant too that the owners of (the now defunct) Grand Forks organic golf course came to organic golf after a career working with organic wine vineyards in Switzerland.

Similarly, interviewees at New Malton discussed how organic golf has attained more credibility over the years from its indirect linkages with other sport-related organic ventures:

I think seventy percent of football pitches [in the UK], I think it’s seventy percent, are actually organic … It’s funny, in football, because players are worth so much, talking about millions of pounds obviously, they’re now worried about injuries. So if they pick up an injury with an open wound, and there’s chemicals on the floor, and it’s infected or something happens, a reaction, it could put a player out of work … It will cost them a lot of money. And again, these football pitches are going organic, not because they’re interested in organics and want to do it, want to save money. It’s because they’re being forced into doing it because they’re worried about being sued by the players and by other teams. ... It’s getting
the ball moving. You know, that could turn out to be one of the best things ever. If football turns organic, then, how many football fans in this country? Millions of them. Most popular sport in the world, in England I think. That movement's there. It'll help. But what I'm saying is, it'd be nice for a sport or a company to want to do it like we do, rather than feel that they have to. That's what'll happen. It'll take someone that has to do it in golf, forced to do it to get them to do it. (Golf professional and course worker, New Malton Golf Club; Personal interview, June 2012)

Ultimately, and acknowledging this guarded optimism, it was evident that those we interviewed were using most of their time and resources to keep their organic golf courses afloat. To do much more than this without additional resources would seem unlikely in the near future. Moreover, the fact that the two organic courses we were aware of in British Columbia, Canada folded since we began our study – including Blackburn Meadows – would seem to confirm that promoting the broader organic golf movement would be a secondary concern for those running these courses. So, while the success of the organic golf movement generally and the success of individual organic courses are likely to be, in the long run, interrelated, recognizing this does not provide much assistance to those dealing with immediate economic issues.

Another potential barrier along these lines could be the existence of differing viewpoints on the need to completely ban synthetic chemicals from golf courses – remembering how Jeff Carlson's stance on synthetic chemicals slightly differed from the position taken by those at Blackburn Meadows and New Malton. Of course, these sorts of nuanced differences are common to social movements of all kinds and can ultimately lead to fractioning and internal dissent (Wilson, 2012b). The organic golf movement, however, has apparently not developed to the point that these sorts of questions have been discussed among movement members.

Golf’s ‘integrated circus’

What has not been mentioned so far are the broader set of structures and reasons that striving for Augusta National-like conditions remains desirable – and why ‘doing what it takes’ (perhaps using synthetic pesticides) to maintain such an aesthetic is generally favoured despite the risks it brings into play. A related question is why the organic movement would face such difficulty when organic golf seems to makes so much sense for environmental and public health-inspired reasons.
One potential explanation is that organic golf poses a threat to those who are an integral part of the economic interrelationships between the golf industry, the chemical industry, the global tourism industry and many governments. The idea that a set of highly integrated and economically motivated relationships would be difficult to break – and that ‘alternative’ and seemingly less profitable possibilities would be trivialized by those with a vested interest in the status quo – would not be surprising for sociologists like Whitson and Gruneau (1997). Whitson and Gruneau have observed how power and influence are generated and secured when different sport-related industries sharing economic goals work together to achieve these goals as part of what they refer to as sport’s ‘integrated circus’ (following Marchak, 1993). Whitson and Gruneau are specifically attuned to relationships between media conglomerates, sport franchises, and corporate sponsors, exploring how such linkages lead to the hyper-promotion of products (e.g. beer – think Coors baseball field in Colorado) and various media technologies and services (think Rogers Centre in Toronto, which hosts gridiron football, baseball, and other events).

Yet a similar logic can be applied in the case of golf. Consider, for example, that pristine and predictable golf experiences that are enabled by chemical applications on courses are thought to support a global golf tourist industry – and that such tourism is beneficial for local economies and their governments (or, at least, is imagined as beneficial in this way). Likewise, the close ties between the golf and chemical industries is a key factor in this regard. Beyond the use of chemicals on golf courses, chemical companies are among the key donors to the GCSAA’s Environmental Institute for Golf (EIFG), as noted in Chapter 5.

The point here is that even if members of the golf industry were interested in decoupling from the chemical or tourism industries, this would seem to be a financially risky proposition. Not only would it be difficult to replace existing sponsors, but the risk of losing paying golfers to courses that continue along the chemical-friendly route would likely, for many in the industry, be considered too high. For governments that have the decision-making power to make across-the-board decisions to ban cosmetic pesticides, this might also be considered too politically risky for their liking – recognizing that if golfers did indeed ‘stay home’ because golf courses were not (literally) green enough, there would undoubtedly by negative backlash from the leisure and tourism industries. There would also, of course, be direct economic implications for governments too – recognizing the increased strain on the public purse associated with replacing voluntary regulatory mechanisms with more direct and stringent ones.
Of course, there are also risks associated with not taking a more precautionary regulatory approach, though these risks fall under the banner of environmental and public health and not economics. In the end, it would seem unlikely that governments working with an ‘environmental managerialist’ sensibility, as per Chapter 7, would stand firmly behind the organic golf movement unless an especially compelling pro-organic golf lobby were to emerge.

**Undermining the treadmill, embracing science? Final reflections on the organic golf movement**

Although the organic response to golf-related environmental problems has its own issues and challenges, there were many aspects of the movement that we found quite promising. Perhaps more than anything, we were impressed with the eclectic and creative approach to dealing with concerns about chemicals. What we mean by this is that the organic golf pioneers we studied were, on the one hand, open to solutions to turfgrass issues that derived from their own experimentation with non-synthetic fertilizers and applications. This ‘science and technology’ approach to dealing with on-course problems – problems that have commonly been dealt with using synthetic pesticides – would certainly seem to align with the principles that underlie an ecological modernist response to environmental problems. In this sense, organic golf leaders are not out of step with their mainstream counterparts in pursuing solutions through experimentation and innovation.

At the same time, conversely, these organic golf leaders were adopting anti-chemical practices that are transformative in the sense that they destabilize the integrated circus at the core of the ‘chemical industry–golf industry’ relationship. One interviewee from New Malton in 2012 made this point in stark terms: “If you think about the implication of what we’re doing here, if I’m right [about the viability of organic golf], then we don’t need a chemical industry.” Organic golf in this sense is mounting a challenge to mainstream responsible golf, what with its lasting fondness for pesticides. At the very least, organic golf disrupts golf’s chemical supply chain (though without discarding the innovative aspects of an EM-driven approach). At most, as per our New Malton interviewee, this supply chain will eventually become altogether obsolete.

To return a final time to our PAAR continuum (see Figure 1 from Chapter 2), the practices and perspectives described in this chapter implicitly, and at times explicitly, call into question the post-political consensus of responsible
Organic golf ‘on the fringe’

195

golf. Post-politics rest on the notion that a particular solution – in this case, an ecological modernist one – is the only viable solution in a given context. Recognizing the many barriers and challenges faced by the purveyors of organic golf – Blackburn Meadows has shut its doors since our research began – advocates of ‘alter-golf’ are at the very least putting an alternative, transformative model of golf provision ‘on the table’ for consideration. This is the best (and in some respects the only) example we encountered of a transformative, but still golf-friendly, response to golf’s environmental impacts. GAGM and the local golf protests described in Chapter 8 belong on our spectrum as well, but these are anti-golf responses (as GAGM’s name makes clear) in that they call for the blockage of golf course developments and/or the elimination of golf altogether.

What is ultimately perhaps most interesting about organic golf is its place within golf’s historical trajectory. We noted above that hand weeding and hand watering can be considered part of the organic superintendent’s (‘naturopathic’) toolkit – acknowledging that organic golf can also employ heavy machinery depending on the superintendent’s preferences and budget. In this regard, we are brought back to the image of the basket- and fork-wielding superintendent, as described in 1916 in the trade publication *The Golf Course* (see Chapter 3).

In theoretical terms, in earlier chapters we assessed golf’s post-war Promethean inclination through the lens of the ‘treadmill of production’. The treadmill is an economic change theory highlighting how, in industrial pursuits, human labour power gives way to mechanical labour power, yielding higher profit margins and further investment in mechanical tools. Of course, all of this often comes with heightened environmental impact as well – for example, when the golf industry shifted from course maintenance by hand to course maintenance by DDT and broad-based spraying equipment. To some extent, organic golf puts the treadmill in reverse. Golf returns to its pre-modern roots.

In the next and final chapter of this book, we reflect on the place of organic golf in the sport’s potential ‘utopian’ future.
