

An Alligator Tale Of Three Golf Courses



by Barbara Joy Cooley, president, Committee of the Islands

Golf courses, with their water features and green grassy expanses, seem to attract some alligators. While all three Sanibel golf courses might be similar in the eyes of a gator, the reality of how these crocodilians are treated differs according to the golf course managers.

Most islanders may know by now that The Sanctuary golf course is Audubon-certified. It is also locally owned. And, it seems, it is a bit kinder to the wildlife. On its website, The Sanctuary describes itself as sharing “a symbiotic relationship with the island’s lifestyle as well as the natural habitats. As an Audubon Society Cooperative Course surrounded by a national wildlife refuge, our club provides a unique balance between a world class golf course and Mother Nature.”

The Dunes golf club is owned by a group called LXR, which describes itself as “an extraordinary new collection of luxury properties that are some of the most treasured luxury resorts, hotels, spas, golf clubs and marinas in the United States, Puerto Rico and Caribbean” on its website. The site calls The Dunes “a lush Sanibel Island golf course and club destination nestled amid an abundant natural landscape.”

The Beachview golf club website boasts “We are a member of Audubon International’s Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses and take great pride in preserving the beautiful, natural Florida landscape that surrounds the course.”

So what happens to alligators on these golf courses?

A series of police reports from 2010 describes efforts by The Dunes golf course management to remove (and destroy) all alligators over four feet long. One report says that the golf course manager, in describing the alligators’ demeanors, “stated he has not seen any signs of aggression; but fears for golfers’ and residents’ well being, because people can get only a few feet from the alligators and they do not move.” The manager “further requested the removal (of the alligators) would be best during the months of April or June when it’s not that busy or if the trapper could possible (sic) remove them at night.”

Again, on November 8, The Dunes golf course manager contacted the police department and “stated that on behalf of The Dunes Country Club, he would like these 8- to 12-foot alligators removed during the night time, not to raise attention to this process.”

Subsequently, in the middle of the night on November 19, a trapper arrived and took two alligators, 8.8 feet and 6.7 feet long, from The Dunes golf course. The gators were destroyed, not relocated, in accordance with the Sanibel nuisance alligator program. Many residents of The Dunes neighborhood were very disturbed by this incident. One neighbor, Chantal Perrotte, put together a petition protesting the harsh anti-alligator policy. By the time the petition was presented to the Sanibel City Council on April 5, 2011, more than 200 people had signed it.

Policy changes after member input

It appears, however, that The Dunes has now acted to change its alligator policy. The January 11, 2011 minutes of The Dunes Advisory Council state that club “members are unhappy that alligators have been removed even though they have not been aggressive; many members feel that the alligators/crocodile add to the exotic nature of The Dunes and are a major attraction; what can be done to see that non-aggressive animals are not reduced further?”

Subsequently, the golf course manager at The Dunes has said that he would no longer take responsibility for requesting removal of nuisance alligators from the golf course. The January 11 minutes also quote The Dunes golf course manager recommending that “any member who feels fearful of alligators should attend a SCCF (Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation) wildlife tour or the alligator education class at The Dunes.”

At the Beachview golf course, on February 20, a resident of Eagle Run Drive called the police to complain about two alligators behind his home. The police officers who responded reported that “Upon arrival, both alligators were on the bank, but retreated into the water when we approached. The alligators stayed about 10 feet from the bank, and would not come any closer.” About these gators, former City of Sanibel Wildlife Committee member Larry Schopp reports, “I observed them on numerous occasions from the nearby shared-use path. On most of those occasions I was joined by delighted tourists as well, snapping pictures and watching in awe – from a safe distance. At no time did those alligators display aggressive behavior in my presence.” Nevertheless, these two alligators (6 feet and 5 to 5.5 feet long) were subsequently caught and destroyed by the trapper, in accordance with the Sanibel nuisance alligator program.

In a very different incident in that same month of February, the golf course manager at The Sanctuary had to deal with a 9.9-foot alligator that had “become too friendly,” according to a Nuisance Alligator Harvest Permit issued by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for just this one incident. The Sanibel Police evidently were not involved this time. The permit, issued on February 3, authorized the trapper to take that one alligator and to transfer it – alive – at the request of the golf course manager, to an alligator farm near Plant City called Allidies Inc.

Why would anyone move to Florida and then expect the alligators to leave?

While we certainly do not want all the alligators to be removed from Sanibel and relocated to alligator farms, it was good that this large alligator did not meet immediate death due to his choice of places to bask in the sun and his refusal to move quickly away from people.

It is disheartening that some of the police reports describe alligators who did move quickly away from people and yet were still given a death sentence. Those alligators were simply doing what they are supposed to be doing.

“All of us who live on Sanibel know that crocodilians were on the island long before any of us arrived, and the alligator has an important role to play in the biota of all of South Florida,” says John Elting, chairman of Audubon of Florida. “I applaud the sensitivity of those golf course managers who respect the alligators’ presence and discourage the expediency of those who do not. The same might be said of our city council members as they monitor the alligator nuisance program.”

As always, the Committee of the Islands welcomes your ideas and input about this and other island issues. Visit our website at www.coti.org, or send us your thoughts via email to coti@coti.org.

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