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Disc golf not as green as it seems

Ken McGary Mar 13, 2013

[Home](#) / [Opinion](#) / [Matters Of Opinion](#)

We appreciate the enthusiasm of the HMB Disc Golf Club for providing a new recreational opportunity to the region. However, a recent news article and supporting editorial in this publication (Review, March 6) contained numerous inaccuracies and omissions concerning disc golf.

The discs used in this sport are not your average Frisbees — they are composed of hardened plastic with dense, narrow edges and are designed to be spun over long distances at speeds of more than 70 mph. Consequently, this sport raises safety and environmental issues that should not be ignored.

The Review story states, “San Francisco has an 18-hole course at Golden Gate Park with plans for a second. Santa Clara County has two courses. Santa Cruz County has four.”

The Golden Gate Park disc golf course was installed in 2003. Two years later the Division of Urban Forestry recommended removal of the course due to tree damage. Since then, there has been a constant effort to open a second course in San Francisco’s McLaren Park, a less glamorous open space, to (in the words of one Recreation and Park commissioner) “spread the damage.”

In response, neighbors and friends of McLaren Park studied and documented the ongoing habitat destruction in Golden Gate Park and through community action have halted numerous attempts at opening a new course in McLaren. We will continue to do so.

Santa Cruz County does have several disc golf courses, but none are without environmental damage. The relatively new course at Pinto Lake has serious impact on the existing plant and bird life. Much of the 27-hole DeLaveaga course has been compacted to bare dirt with severe erosion problems on several fairways.

In fact, several previous proposals have been made for disc golf courses in San Mateo County. All have been rebuffed due to concern over environmental impact.

Also from the story, "... a disc golf course largely leaves the native landscape intact. But disc golf players say the sport doesn't involve any permanent damage to the environment nor does it need water or chemicals to keep the course thriving." In fact, part of the thrill of the game for many players is trying to fly their discs over bushes and around trees to get to the basket. Discs occasionally smack trees, and players often go bushwhacking through the landscape to search for wayward throws.

This "bushwhacking" is what causes the majority of environmental damage. Each throw's trajectory is determined by random forces of wind, natural obstacles such as trees and shrubs, and the player's skill. Leaves and smaller limbs are stripped from trees, and a majority of the course is, over time, beaten down to bare dirt from heavy foot traffic.

"This is the greenest damn sport you could have," exclaimed Kristofer Mickelson, president of the local disc golf club.

Unfortunately, Mickelson didn't finish his sentence. Disc golf is perhaps the "greenest damn sport you could have" among those that require more than 20 acres of public land for a dedicated, single-sport course.

Disc golfers love to proclaim that they can share a course area with existing users, but experience shows that once a course is installed, players come to consider the course as their own and show no patience for other casual users of the area. Besides, who wants to walk around an open space with hard plastic projectiles flying around at highway speeds? No one takes a casual stroll on a regular golf course, and they won't on a well-used disc golf course either.

The only advantage to dedicating such a large open space to a disc golf course is if the land is overrun with homeless encampments or is otherwise a derelict property. In these cases, the course might actually be seen as an improvement. Otherwise, be careful what you ask for.

Ken McGary is a member of the Save McLaren Park Coordinating Committee in San Francisco.