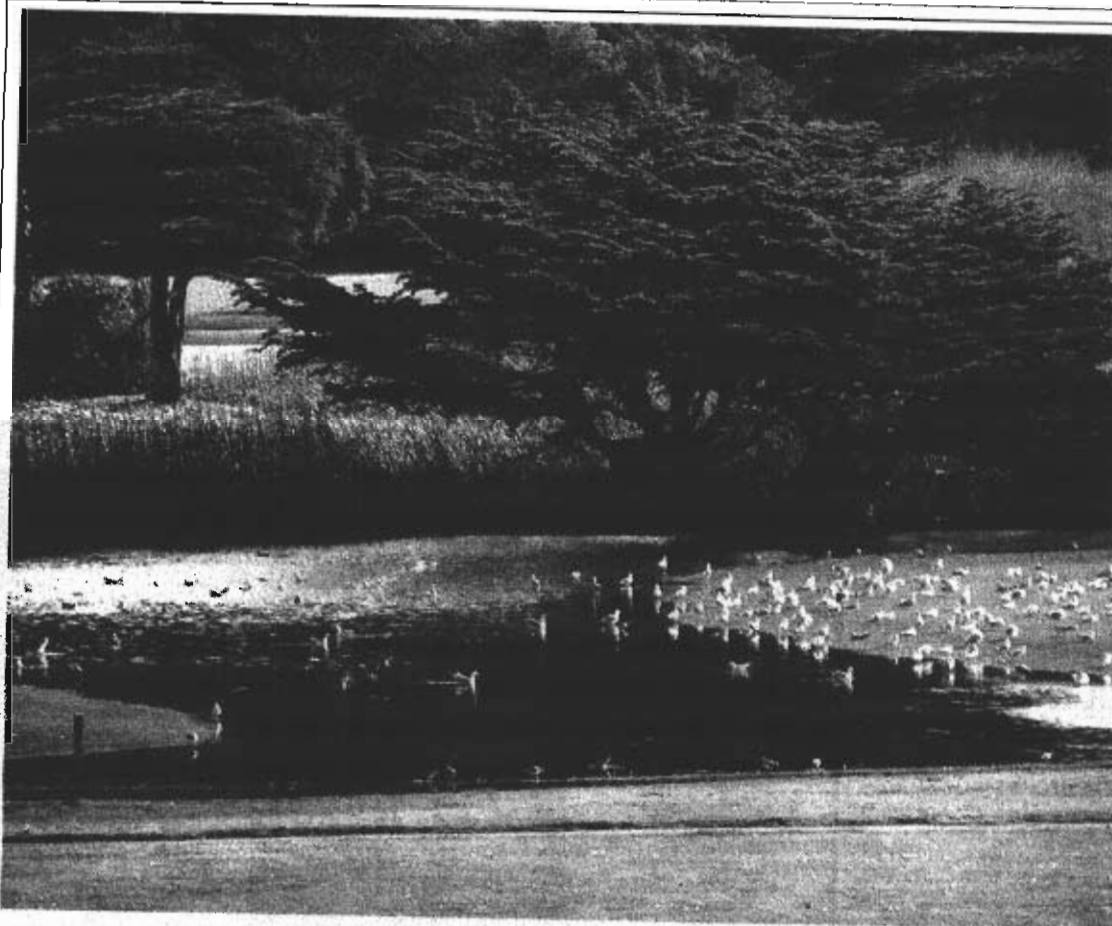


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Pacifica TRIBUNE

Wednesday, February 1, 2006 • Vol. 61, No 5 • 50¢ per copy • Pacifica, CA 94



The Sharp Park Golf Course has been partially closed since mid-December due to flooding from rains that created a red-legged frog breeding ground. Tribune Photos — Chris Hunter

Sharp Park Golf Course vs. the Frogs

Rain-filled 'Laguna Salada' now protected breeding habitat

By CHRIS HUNTER
EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

The Sharp Park Golf Course, which sits in the middle of Pacifica but is owned by the City and County of San Francisco, is often called the "poor man's Pebble Beach." It's a glorious oceanfront golf course with a public recreation pedigree.

But it's been mostly off-limits to golfers for more than a month and will continue to be partially closed for another month, at least.

The reason? Rain has flooded the fairway of the fourteenth hole, raising the level of a naturally occurring swampy pond that has been ruled a California Red-legged Frog breeding habitat. In essence, all the holes between the oceanfront berm and the clubhouse are off-limits to humans while the frogs recreate.

Mark Duane, the proprietor of the Sharp Park Golf Course pro shop and restaurant, also manages the golf course. He says he has had to lay off employees and field calls from frustrated golfers because the golf course is crippled and folks can only play on the front nine holes east of Highway 1.

Ever-increasing federal environmental rules and regulations concerning endangered and threatened species have labeled much of the San Mateo County coastside as habitat for the San Francisco Garter Snake and the California Red-legged Frog. When the golf course flooded this year, as it does most years when there is heavy rain, drainage pumps were not allowed to continue pumping water out because of fear that it would eliminate a newly formed breeding ground for the frog — smack in the middle of the fairway.



"It floods and then the frogs sit out there in the middle of the lagoon," said Duane. "You have to maintain the

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Golf Course

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water level. Last year we were stopped from draining the water, too." But last year, the situation only lasted a few weeks.

"It's the whole back nine," said Duane, who has been at the golf course for 15 years. "It directly affects the whole golf course. San Francisco doesn't want to get into any environmental litigation."

The situation has created a dilemma for the humans who work at and enjoy the Sharp Park Golf Course. The Sharp Park Restaurant, which, along with the pro shop maintains a Pacifica business license, has seen its business plummet since the rains. While many local Pacificans enjoy the restaurant, the bulk of its business comes from hungry golfers. Those golfers are mostly staying away.

"I'm selling sunshine and exercise now," says Duane, who is keeping a few

holes open for the public and trying to put an optimistic spin on things. The price is a modest \$10 during the week, but it's not the same as playing on a gorgeous 18-hole oceanfront course, so serious golfers aren't showing up. "Well, it's a good bargain, but it's really rough," admits Duane. "Our clientele is the friends and families of Pacificans now."

While Duane has been meeting with San Francisco officials, trying to solve the problem, he admits it's a nearly impossible situation. The frogs take precedent over the people in this case and he can only wait for the former "Laguna Salada" to drain naturally.

"I don't have control of the pumps," he says. "We just have to wait until the lagoon drains. Mother Nature will take its course."

The irony of the lagoon expanding because a man-made berm limits the natural drainage is not lost on Duane. In its truly "natural" state, it would be a brackish mixture of seawater and fresh

water. The frogs would not be choosing such a location because of a higher salinity content.

"The frog has managed to breed successfully," says Duane, who understands the sensitivity of the environmental efforts to protect the frog but is nonetheless disappointed about the impact in this specific case.

"Our restaurant is taking a direct hit," he says. "We have an established clientele that, needless to say, is our lifeblood. It's a very difficult time for us. We haven't been able to pump the water out, so it could be a couple of months. I've been told we might be able to open in March, but maybe not until further notice. Right now, it's brutal. We might have to shut down the entire business. It makes no sense to have the frogs breeding in the middle of the fairway. Where that water is now makes no sense to me."

The specific issue revolves around the breeding season and subsequent gestation period of the Red-legged Frogs. The rains raised the water level in the existing tulle vegetation area of the golf course and the frogs attached their eggs on the stalks at a higher level. If the water is drained off prematurely, the eggs will dry out and the frog eggs will not survive to hatch. Duane has been told that there is a strong possibility the frogs will be hatching in late February or March, thus enabling the water level to be drained.

Although the entire golf course was not flooded, the swampy marshland created at the fourteenth hole fairway has become a sensitive environmental location off-limits to all but specially permitted biologists and scientists. Therefore, only those golf holes east of Highway 1 and far away from the frogs are available for play.

The natural beauty of Sharp Park Golf Course is not lost on the San Francisco Rec and Park Department, which promotes the 18-hole course on its website. "The course, opened in 1931, was originally designed by famed architect Alister Mackenzie and landscaped by John McLaren," states the PR for the course. "The par 72 course is 6,299 yards long and offers fabulous views of the Pacific Ocean and surrounding areas. This is a walkable inland and seaside course lined with Cypress and Pine trees that wraps around Laguna Salada, a natural lake ringed with reeds, cattails and tulles. Living in the marsh are a variety of birds including mallards, coots and red-winged black-birds."

This winter, you can add Red-Legged Frogs to that list.