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Lawyer leads fight to save species on city-owned golf course

By

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If the California red-legged frog and its main predator — the San Francisco garter snake — survive, it will likely be due to one man: Brent Plater.

The 35-year-old environmental lawyer, rarely seen in public without a freshly pressed suit and a gold-plated belt buckle with his name on it, has single-handedly brought the fight to close the Sharp Park Golf Course to the attention of San Francisco city leaders, who are on the verge of making the city-owned course in Pacifica a high-profile example of local leadership to save endangered species on public lands.

A leader in several groups such as Wild Equity and the Sierra Club, Plater also is the mastermind of the Big Year contest to discover more rare plants and animals on public land as a way of saving and expanding sensitive endangered species' habitats.

His most recent, and arguably most public, battle — the controversy over whether to close Pacifica's Sharp Park Golf Course — is just now coming to a head. On Dec. 14, the Wild Equity Institute issued a 60-day intent to sue the city for violations of the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act.

"Brent has a deep knowledge of the law and he's also a phenomenal grass-roots organizer," said Kassie Siegel, director of the Climate Law Institute for the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity. "I and many others expect to see many great things from Brent."

Bay Area scientists and ecologists say Plater has an uncanny ability to merge environmental advocacy with community engagement. Environmentalists say he has a gift for helping others to relate with the natural world, a quality that may help propel the next wave of the environmental movement.

Colleagues say a paradigm shift happened in 2008, when Plater launched the first Big Year, a birder phrase borrowed from the 1998 North American Big Year, when more

birds were seen that year than any other — 75 different species to be exact. This year's search kicked off Jan. 9.

During 2008, Plater rallied thousands of volunteers to take notice of the Bay Area's 36 federally protected plants and animals, and to take action to help save them, such as pulling nonnative weeds and writing congress members. People who know Plater say he has the power to ignite passion for the tiniest of critters like the red-legged frog and garter snake, to more charismatic creatures such as the Southern sea otter, a mammal endemic to San Francisco Bay whose health is also indicative of the bay's health.

"The Big Year in 2008 exceeded the expectations I had for it," Plater said. "About 14,000 people participated, and we had only hoped to reach 1,000 people by the end of the year."

Plater has his detractors, who say he is too radical when it comes to filing lawsuits and taking other actions to save endangered species, like preventing domesticated animals from encroaching on vulnerable habitat.

"Personally, I think if you're out there to change the world and you're not ruffling any feathers, then something's wrong," said Brad Johnson, a legislative coordinator for the Sierra Club Bay Area Chapter. "A lot of people don't like him, and I think that's a good thing."

Endangered frog, snake at center of conflict

The debate between Bay Area environmentalists and a strong-willed band of golf enthusiasts over the golf course has the city's ears. One side is fighting for an 18-hole golf course, the other for a restored national park. At the center of this heated conflict are a frog and a snake on the brink of extinction.

Throughout the past few months, the Board of Supervisors has held public meetings to solicit public opinion about whether to keep the golf course alive or expand the parklands. Future meetings are expected, but not scheduled thus far.

Sharp Park Golf Course, lining Highway 1, is a former wetland that was turned into a golf course in 1932. Environmentalists say wetlands and lagoons are particularly important along coastlines because they act like sponges, protecting inland areas from storm surges, and are essential to help protect land from coastal erosion.

The golf course is adjacent to Mori Point, the frog and snakes' main habitat. But the federally protected animals can't tell the difference between the national park and the manicured golf course, leaving them struggling for survival.

Environmental advocates argue that San Francisco drastically altered Sharp Park's natural features by dredging and filling the area to create the golf course 80 years ago. Since then, they say, Sharp Park has been plagued with water-management and flood-control problems.

Meanwhile, golfers are clinging to the hope that their golf course — designed by famed architect Allister Mackenzie, who is most celebrated for Augusta National Golf Course in Georgia, where the Masters Tournament is played — will hold up as a historic preservation site.

In 2008, the most recent year for which records are available, a \$1.3 million deficit was reported in the operation of San Francisco's golf courses, according to a report by the San Francisco golf alternatives task force.

An array of problems has made Sharp Park a strain on the city's golf fund and has swelled the city's budget. Though some courses like Harding Park Municipal Golf Course generate significant revenue, an August 2009 report found that Sharp Park and Lincoln Park golf courses do not generate enough revenue to support their operations on an annual basis.

Parks and recreation officials say that the park makes money only in some years. Last year, Sharp Park lost \$92,000.

In a November 2009 financial viability and analysis report, the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department weighed alternatives like getting rid of the golf course entirely or reducing the number of holes. But the department decided to keep the 18-hole golf course open with some minor changes, such as relocating a few holes and doing some minor dredging and draining.

"This option really is a win-win for everyone," said Phil Ginsburg, manager for San Francisco Parks and Recreation Department. "We're able to maintain an 18-hole course while meeting recovery goals for the beloved California red-legged frog and the San Francisco garter snake. And, it's the most cost-effective solution of the three."

The minor changes to the golf course cost could range anywhere from \$6 million to \$10 million.

The report concluded more than the loss of wetlands, the biggest threat to the frog and snake is the increase of recreational activities. However, Bay Area environmentalists dispute reports' claim.

"This is absurd," Plater said. "There has been hundreds of frogs and snakes killed at Sharp Park. We know because we've seen the dead eggs, we've seen the dead bodies. Those deaths have been caused because of the pumping and mowing operations."

"There's never anywhere been a picnicker that's killed a frog or a snake," he added. "Sharp Park golf course is losing money. It's killing endangered species and it puts the surrounding community at risk every year when it floods."

But golf course manager Mark Duane stands by the Recreation and Parks Department's report, saying protected animals can live in harmony with the golf course. "Science backs it up," he said.

Institute assails report on climate effects

Every year during the rainy season, ponds form on the green, creating new habitat for the frogs to lay their eggs. But because of the federal protection of the frogs, the park is prevented from draining the ponds and killing the eggs — leaving the golf course virtually unusable. Wild Equity's intent to sue charges, among other violations of the Endangered Species Act, that the park has been pumping the ponds, causing eggs to perish.

There is evidence that at least one garter snake has been mowed over and killed because of the golf-course upkeep.

The institute argues that the report ignores the impact climate change will have on the sensitive area, such as rising sea levels and the increase of salt levels in the ponds, rendering them inhabitable. It also disagrees with the report's findings that recreational activities would cause further harm to the frog and snake.

"What we have found is the status quo at Sharp Park has not a lot of supporters, not nearly as many supporters as we have to create a better public park out there," Plater said. "But they have powerful supporters. Golfers are rich and they put a lot of pressure on the Parks and Recreation Department by waving money around to keep the golf course as it is."

It's hard to pull Plater away from his work. When not at City Hall talking up public officials or out in the field digging up exotic plants, he's frequently on the phone rallying for a little animal no one may even know about, such as the unarmored threespine stickleback, a tiny freshwater fish.

His coworkers often ask how he gets so much done. Siegel said Plater's approach is pragmatic: "You might have to pressure an elected official for a cause, but the thing is, do it dressed well."

On a recent day, Plater recalled a quote from Ralph Nader that reflects his work ethic. He took a swig from his chocolate stout, a bite from his sesame bagel — the only thing he'd eaten all day, and said, "If you approach a job that deals with the public interest with a typical 9-to-5 mindset, you're doing yourself a disservice because the beauty of the work is in the opportunity you have to create something wonderful and build something that everybody can enjoy."

The Golden Gate National Park Big Year was launched Jan. 9. The goal is to see and save as many endangered species within a year's time as possible, and complete action items to help save the federally protected species. The winner will win a \$1,000 cash prize. To learn more, visit <http://www.wildequity.org/sections/2>.