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Tee'd Off

By Ben Terrall, Fall 2009

As record budget cuts and layoffs hit home in San Francisco, there's one constituency Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi and local environmental activists say has not been asked to sacrifice much: golfers. Now they may be asked to step aside for the sake of other critters who share the Sharp Park putting green.

In March, the city passed an ordinance proposed by Mirkarimi requiring its Recreation and Park Department to develop a plan for restoring habitat in Sharp Park for at-risk species. The 410-acre park, which is in Pacifica but is owned and operated by the City of San Francisco, includes an 18-hole golf course on about 133 of its acres. Critics say the course is maintained at the expense of the threatened California Red-legged frog and the endangered San Francisco garter snake.

The park starts at the edge of the beach behind a sea wall, and stretches across a diverse topography: grasslands, scrublands, forest, a lagoon called Laguna Salada, Horse Stable Pond, and Sanchez Creek. The frogs and snakes live primarily in the park's wetlands and on nearby Mori Point, which is owned by the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The animals breed and feed in Laguna Salada, Horse Stable Pond, the canal connecting these two water bodies, and in lower Sanchez Creek—all of which are on the golf course itself. The amphibians disperse to adjacent uplands habitat during the dry season, where they survive the hot weather by hibernating in rodent burrows.

Mark Twain, in his short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," immortalized the red-legged frog. During California's Gold Rush, the amphibian was considered a delicacy and widely eaten by miners out to make their fortune. Today the frog has been driven from seventy percent of its historic range.

Environmental lawyer Brent Plater is a key player in the campaign to restore the natural ecology of Sharp Park. He stresses that the fate of the San Francisco garter snake, which he calls "the most beautiful serpent in Northern California, and the most rare," is even more worrisome. In the 1940s the snake was considered abundant, but now it is approaching extinction. Fewer than 2,000 San Francisco garter snakes are left globally; Sharp Park/Mori Point is one of only five

viable populations left. These populations are small: six snakes were found at Mori Point in 2004, 13 snakes in 2006, and five in 2008. At Sharp Park, five snakes were found in 2004, then only two in 2008.

Proximity to humans and their golf game isn't helping. In 2005, a lawnmower on the golf course killed one of the few remaining snakes. The same year the Fish and Wildlife Service of the US Department of the Interior noted in a letter to the parks departments' golf program manager that a water pump "lowered the water level at Horse Stable Pond and resulted in the stranding and exposure of a number of egg masses of the California Red-legged frog. This action apparently caused the death of an unknown quantity of embryonic tadpoles of the completely aquatic early stage of this animal's lifecycle."

Plater points out that a single "take" of any federally listed species can result in a fine of $25,000. The frog egg masses at the golf course could contain thousands of eggs, so fines for those "takings" could be enormous.

The Center for Biological Diversity joined the Sharp Park debate after San Francisco's parks department proposed what Jeff Miller, a conservation advocate with the nonprofit, calls "a flawed plan calling for privatizing the mismanaged and financially failing golf course and illegally reconstructing flooded portions of the course at the expense of endangered species." After evidence surfaced of the deaths of red-legged frogs and the snake, the group threatened to sue the city if it did not cease harming endangered species, restore Sharp Park to its natural state as a coastal wetland, and provide more diverse recreational opportunities for the public at the site. The center supported Mirkarimi's legislation and urged their membership to back the initiative.

Once the ordinance passed, the city funded a study of the park by the firm Tetra Tech, which is assessing options for the golf course's future; at press time its conclusions had not yet been made public. However, the three main ideas on the table are to keep the golf course as it is, shrink the course while making some environmental changes, or shut it down in favor of restoring habitat for the endangered animals, as well as for migratory birds.

The Center for Biological Diversity would like to preserve as large a swath of wetlands as possible, but Plater says that if the study concludes it is a viable option, he "could live with" a Sharp Park golf course reduced to nine holes that did not compete with the snake and frog habitat. If the course is shut down, Plater believes that the city's other existing golf courses could handle the business at Sharp Park. A 2008 study concluded that of San Francisco city golf courses, only Harding Park is operating above fifty percent capacity; Sharp Park was operating in the mid-to-upper forty percent capacity.

But golfers want to keep the course open. Richard Harris, a lawyer who cofounded the San Francisco Public Golf Alliance, argues that Sharp Park is especially important to golfers because the game started as a seaside sport in Scotland, on bluffs and dunes, and Sharp Park is the only seaside course in San Francisco. He is passionate about Sharp Park being a legacy of Dr. Alister MacKenzie, one of the most famous landscape architects to design a golf course. While Harris

concedes that the ocean washed away several of the original holes MacKenzie put in place, he says that remaining links designed by MacKenzie are important highlights of the grounds. The course is “a treasure of the golf world,” says Harris. “It is one of only three public seaside links courses in California. The other two are on the Monterey Peninsula, and one of them has green fees over $200. It is one of MacKenzie’s very few public courses, and it is the only seaside links course built by MacKenzie remaining in the world.” (Green fees at Sharp Park run around $30.)

Harris insists that at other golf courses, endangered species have coexisted with golfers, and adjustments can be made to the course to make the frog and snake safer than they are now. In a letter to the San Francisco Planning Department this June, Harris suggested creating “a native plant/no-golf area surrounding an ‘island’ green complex in the vicinity of the current 12th green,” reducing golf maintenance in some areas to hand-mowing, and making raised boardwalk causeways the only access to some playing areas.

Other defenders of the golf course maintain on the “Save Sharp Park Golf Course” Web site (SharpPark. SaveGolf.net) that the course has actually helped the animals: “The presence and protection of Sharp Park Golf Course since 1932 turned a salt water estuary into a fresh water habitat. The California red-legged frogs and San Francisco garter snakes need fresh water. Were it not for that fresh water habitat created and maintained by the golf course, there would be only peripheral red-legged frogs or garter snakes, if any.” But Miller argues that this isn’t so. “The habitat pre-golf was freshwater wetlands and there were relatively abundant populations of both garter snakes and red-legged frogs at the site,” he says. “The golf course construction nearly extirpated both species and maintenance activities keep both species at the current marginal levels.”

Sierra Club coastal director Mark Massara expresses skepticism about the possibilities for happy inter-species coexistence. He argues that the oceanside links trample the threatened species’ terrain. “There are a hundred acres dedicated to golf. Where do the animals go? There’s a real imbalance they [golfers] are not acknowledging,” Massara says.

Preserving Pacific coastal terrain may become even more important as sea level rises an expected four and a half feet over the next century. Massara says, “As seas rise, we want to protect upland open space and wetland areas as buffer habitat and wildlife corridors.” Miller, of the Center for Biological Diversity, agrees that restoring some of the former wetlands will protect the park’s wildlife as well as nearby human residents from sea-level rise. “This will make the endangered species more resilient to climate change and saltwater intrusion, and reduce flooding that threatens park neighbors,” he says.

Massara is no fan of the golfing industry; he says that since the middle of the 20th century, courses have overused resources. He says that the 21,000 golf courses in the US each use millions of gallons of water per day, and, generally, eight to ten pounds of chemical fertilizer per acre per year. Golf courses have wrecked entire island coral reefs with runoff of herbicides and fertilizers. While he concedes that the golfing industry has made some progress in addressing damage caused by overuse of industrial chemicals and fossil-fuel-guzzling mowers, Massara says, “Eighty percent of what’s been done is green washing and PR.”

So far, there's little agreement about how to restore Sharp Park, and how much it might cost. Although Harris and the SF Public Golf Association have suggested some environmental mitigation ideas, they nevertheless want to preserve the park and public golf course largely as they are, without eliminating holes.

Plater claims that this will be prohibitively expensive. He estimates that repairing and shoring up the sea wall that separates the park from the Pacific could cost up to $32 million, at $10,000 per linear foot. San Francisco also already invested $240,000 on one large outfall pipe that pumps water from the golf course.

On top of that—although golf advocates like Harris disagree—the Center for Biological Diversity argues that simply running the golf course loses money for the city. Jeff Miller claims that the parks department "plays hide-the-ball with their financial data—they subsidize Sharp Park by taking money from the general fund (and depriving the natural areas program and other San Francisco recreational facilities that money) to keep it from showing a loss." By counting this subsidy as income, Miller claims, they "create the illusion the course breaks a profit." Indeed, San Francisco's budget analyst recently concluded that the Sharp Park Golf Course brought a net loss of $42,784 to the department for the 2008-09 fiscal year.

Some critics also say the golf course's seaside location is a financialliability. In an April letter to the Board of Supervisors, coastal ecologist Peter Baye wrote of the cost of maintaining the current golf course, "The City must expect long-term significant increases in maintenance costs, as well as foreseeable catastrophic storm damage and post-storm reconstruction and rehabilitation of Sharp Park golf infrastructure."

"These flood and coastal hazard risks are extraordinary liabilities: to my knowledge, no other golf courses in California have been constructed or maintained at or below sea level immediately behind a vulnerable, low beach ridge," Baye continued.

Plater suggests that greatly shrinking or eliminating the golf course could earn the city money: "A restored Sharp Park could be funded by a wetlands mitigation bank. Credits were selling last year at $3.5 million per acre for wetlands restoration.
There are 200 acres that could be restored at Sharp Park (out of about 400). That's $700,000,000 in gross revenue. No golf model would ever provide that much money to City coffers."

Consultant and mitigation specialist Allen McReynolds of Mitigation Strategies, LLC, who specializes in habitat conservation plans for municipalities and developing strategic plans for "landscape-scale" eco-system protection, is surveying Sharp Park for potential restoration. "It's not 'golf bad, habitat good'—that's not the point," McReynolds says. He mentions that options like a nature center with paths for walking or riding would be "a wonderful opportunity for the broader community," and says that the bottom line is that any restoration plan must adhere to the Endangered Species Act. He has recommended that the city launch a public discussion about what limitations could be placed on the park if it is used as a wildlife preserve—such as banning dogs or bicycles—and which activities may still be allowed, such as hiking and birdwatching. The result, he says, "would be a park designed for both the endangered species and human uses."

And there's another bottom line: "The point is, what is our priority as a city?" Mirkarimi asks. A 2004 survey of San Francisco residents found that the most popular recreational request among respondents was for more hiking and biking trails. Golfing
came in a distant sixteenth. (Nationally, the number of people who play golf has been steadily declining since 2000.)

Yet golf has received the lion's share of some city resources. A Planning and Conservation League California Park Bond analysis from 2005 concluded that "San Francisco used all of its Prop. 12 and RZH [Roberti-Z'Berg-Harris urban open space] block grant funds, over $13 million in total, for the renovation of the Harding Park Golf Course." Given that Prop 12 specified that its program funds be used "with emphasis on unmet needs in the most heavily populated and most economically disadvantaged areas within each jurisdiction," it would seem that monies that should have gone to struggling communities have already been diverted to golf.

Mirkarimi points to the layoff of more than 72 recreation directors in 2009, many in poor neighborhoods, as an example of how resources had been diverted from those areas. Isabel Wade, founder of the San Francisco Neighborhood Parks Council, agrees. "Where is the sense of equity?" Wade asks. "Other recreations have to consider cutbacks. Golfers can compromise too."

And in the end, says Miller, we have to consider our amphibian and reptilian neighbors: "We have a rare opportunity to protect and recover two endangered species that are linked to local history and are an important part of the local ecology."