

The Course of Childhood: Dreaming New Landscapes

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The world has a wonderful ability to rebound after being hit hard. This is a story of resilience and transformation.

When I think back on my childhood, there is one setting which seems more central than any other. I'm brought back to my grandmother's house, about 30 minutes outside of Raleigh, North Carolina in a, then, small and unique town called Wake Forest. This was the home of Wake Forest University back before I was around, but to me, it was home to the woods which I spent most of my days from ages five to fifteen. My grandmother, a wonderful, strong, and always kind woman named Jean, and her second husband (my grandfather) Thomas, moved away from a large and quirky family in Michigan down to Wake Forest when my father was just a young teen. They settled into a little, quiet neighborhood which was still being developed, surrounded by a golf course, to attract retirees. I didn't always live there, but seeing as my young, recently divorced parents didn't have much stability aside from their parents, I would spend varying intervals of time residing there.

Again, before my time, the golf course was a large swath of forest which bordered US-1, the long highway which connects Wake Forest to Raleigh, and Raleigh to major cities in both Virginia and South Carolina. As with most golf courses, which occupy over 2 million acres in the United States alone, the forests have to be flattened to be replaced with their seemingly "perfect" green grass. It has become an expectation that no matter the costs, the grass has to be radiantly green. To achieve this, the topsoils are excavated, invasive grasses are planted, while they are kept alive and made "perfect" by intensive irrigation and heavy fertilizer and pesticide use.

The loud and destructive process of constructing a golf course tends to send wildlife fleeing to safer places, which were available in the surrounding woods outside of the soon-to-be course. The aquatic life in adjacent streams that are so vital to its health, especially the forgotten about microorganisms and amphibians, cannot so easily escape the onslaught of destabilized soil and chemicals that are essential to just about every golf course. This is all a part of a larger land-use problem that causes destruction of healthy ecosystems, which in turn creates landscapes which contribute to climate change and species loss. Healthy ecosystems help to sequester carbon dioxide through photosynthesis and microbial use, and this sort of land use both releases back into the environment and reduces Earth's ability to put it away. Compounding this, the fertilizers used to keep the course bright green produce nitrous oxides, which can be up to 300 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

Golf never excited me, although I did have some bonding moments with my grandfather pretending that it did. The thing that made me most excited about living around this Wake Forest golf course was the multitude of small to medium sized ponds which dotted the altered landscape. Artificially stocked with fish, and full of frogs, snakes, and especially turtles, this was where I first really discovered my love for these slimy friends and their habitats. It seems, from memory, that I would wake up in the morning exclusively to grab my buckets, nets, and my green leather-bound *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Reptiles and Amphibians*, and set out on a turtle catching expedition that stretched all over the the boundaries of the golf course. The typical haul consisted of eastern painted turtles, stinkpots, and the occasional yellow-bellied sliders and common snapping turtles. By age 10 I knew them all by sight, and could even offer a mispronounced Latin-sounding name for them. Sometimes I would take them home with me for a couple hours so I could really get a good look at them, and then I would give them a name and a little Sharpie dot on their plastron so maybe I could

reconnect with them another time (if they didn't learn to stay away from my net). Although golf courses are associated with major environmental impacts, not all of them are harmful. One positive impact golf courses may have, if managed properly, is their ability to harbor turtle populations. The ponds in golf courses help connect green spaces, and can be a better habitat for turtles than ponds in other managed landscapes like farms or purely residential areas. But all of those ponds are there for a reason: any single golf course in the United States may use around 300,000 gallons of fresh water for irrigation. *Per day*. Of course, the best scenario for wildlife would probably be no golf course at all.

It must have been around 2008, and as a 10 year old, I didn't concern myself with financial crises much. All I knew was that the golf course was shutting down, and I was going to be living with my grandparents for a while. Suffice to say I was completely stoked. This meant that I wouldn't have to avoid golf balls while I was out looking for turtles, and I basically had free reign. The club-house was boarded up and the pool that three nearby neighborhoods including mine shared was emptied and locked up. A bummer for most of my neighbors, but I preferred the other water sources. Within a pretty short period of time after the foreclosure, the golf course looked radically different. The asphalt golf cart paths began to crack and sprout. The once green turf had turned into a golden savannah of grass almost as tall as I was. I was beginning to notice more creatures all around me. There were more deer, foxes, blue herons, and even the occasional yips of coyotes which made my grandmother nervous. The whole area had transformed into a wonderland by my standards. *Why couldn't it always have been this way?* The thick green ponds began to clear up without the bombardment of toxic pesticides and herbicides which caused eutrophication, sucking the dissolved oxygen out of the water and limiting the sensitive pond community. My family must have felt like they never saw me, I was always out there. I spent countless hours of my childhood out in that golf-course-turned-nature-

preserve. I was growing up alongside the landscape that had been so stunted and rejected by the developers, and I was watching how it could heal given a little time.

A few years after the transformation, it was almost as if the golf course never existed. The old clubhouse was just a compilation of boarded up windows, broken glass, and spray-painted art. The tall pines that lined the former golf cart path had pushed their roots through, and the pioneer grasses started to reclaim the long stretches of green facade that once buried them. The open fields allowed for the tall grasses to flourish, undisturbed by mowers and pesticides, harboring rabbits, skinks, snakes, and loads of insects. Golf balls became fossils, and almost none of the golf enthusiasts were very good paleontologists, so pretty much nobody went out there except to walk their dogs. These forgotten golf balls both underground and in the water caused invisible problems though, slowly breaking down into unwanted plastic particles. One day they'll be completely gone. I wasn't thinking about that as a kid though, I was in it for the animals. Studies have found that abandoned golf courses can provide unique ecosystem opportunities. They can act as "wild fauna corridors" which can support all kinds of species, from deer to bears to songbirds to beetles. Even though the area was bordered by neighborhoods and highways, this little patch of land slowly but surely got reclaimed by the wildlife. The artificial ponds which used to be a source of irrigation water started looking more like wetlands where thousands of baby toads swarmed every spring, and where there was never a lack of turtles with their round heads peeking out from the pond's surface like bobbers. Pine tree saplings shot out all over the landscape since there was nobody there to stop them. And golf course foreclosures are on the rise. This is mostly due to the simple fact that golf's popularity is declining with each successive generation, but also because they are expensive to operate and rely on so many harmful resources. The population of avid golfers have dropped from 30 million to below 20 million since 2002, and in the past decade, over 800 golf courses have closed down.

As more and more golf courses get shut down around the country, residents, developers, and cities are struggling to figure out what to do with them. Many abandoned golf courses share a similar fate to the one in Wake Forest, which is real estate development, or other times, the development of “commercial zones”. Sounds boring, but this isn’t a surprise in the world of profit motive we live in. Some residents wish to turn their out-of-business golf courses into neighborhood parks, still groomed and managed to suit the desires of the property owners. I wonder what would happen though, if those abandoned golf courses were left untouched, allowing them to rebound on their own (or with a little help from ecologists and the like). With all of this land, we could challenge our ideas of what “nature” is allowed to be, and push toward natural landscapes outside of national parks. Natural landscapes could be mixed within residential neighborhoods, creating hybrid and convivial landscapes which both people and wildlife could share and benefit from. We could use this opportunity to create more climate change resilient communities, communities which are biodiverse, beautiful, and refreshing. Maybe some more radically minded communities would push for multi-use action, for growing food, producing clean energy, for recreation, conservation, and whatever else they decide. It could be a great exercise in community democracy and autonomy. Would communities value the ecosystem services of wetlands, and the biodiversity that would come along with regeneration more than their golf courses? Unless golf makes a surprise comeback, many communities, towns, and developers are going to have to make decisions on how to use these two million acres.

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