

Golf course: Playing fields, wildlife sanctuaries or both

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"FORE"...Though they may not help improve a person's golf game, stream salamanders might change the way golfers think about the local country club in the near future, following a new University of Missouri study.

"There are more than 17,000 golf courses in the United States, and approximately 70 percent of that land is not used for playing," said Ray Semlitsch, Curators' Professor of Biology in the MU College of Arts and Science. "These managed green spaces aren't surrogates for protected land and ecosystems, but they can include suitable habitat for species native to the area, including salamanders. Golf courses could act as nature sanctuaries if managed properly."

In an ongoing study, Semlitsch and Mark Mackey, a graduate student at MU, are examining the effect of golf courses on salamander populations. Working with 10 golf courses in North Carolina, Semlitsch and Mackey are measuring stream salamanders' abundance and diversity in order to make biologically relevant management suggestions for golf course superintendents. The researchers are hoping to balance human recreation with the protection of wildlife.

"With more than 2.2 million acres of green space on U.S. golf courses, there is great potential for golf courses to serve as sanctuaries for many wildlife species," Mackey said. "Managing landscapes for human use and the preservation of biodiversity will create a win-win situation for stakeholders and wildlife."

In the study, the researchers are setting up transects in the streams of the 10 course for intensive sampling. By comparing the abundance and diversity of salamanders in golf course habitats, the team will be able to assess the adequacy of current course management. Salamanders play a major role in the overall food chain; by studying salamanders, researchers can gain additional information about other habitats in the area. In addition, Semlitsch and Mackey will make recommendations for the U.S. Golf Association, which can be used to manage golf courses throughout the nation.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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