

Fighting Toxic Greens: The Global Anti-Golf Movement (GAG'M) Revisited

Anita Pleumarom

Tourism Investigation & Monitoring Team, Bangkok, Thailand

Preface

6 December 2014—environmental activists in Rio de Janeiro gear up for “Ocupa Golfe” (Occupy Golf) in protest of what they see as the largest environmental devastation in their city’s history. The controversy is about the golf course built for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. The site covering an area the same as 100 soccer fields is part of the previously protected Marapendi’s Municipal Natural Reserve and home to approximately 300 species of animals, many of which are endangered. As is customary with Olympic-related projects with tight timelines, the area was fast-tracked for development. On the initiative of city mayor Eduardo Paes, Supplementary Law No. 125/2013 was passed in an emergency city council session to allow the golf course construction, even though the Public Prosecutor’s Office had already considered the text to be unconstitutional. According to Ocupa Golfe, the true reason behind this golf course project is property speculation as the concession allows for the immediate construction of 23 22-storey luxury buildings. Along with the Public Prosecutor’s Office, Ocupa Golf is fighting for the suspension of the environmental license and the recovery of the environment degradation caused by the construction of the Olympic golf course.¹

After a 112-year hiatus, golf is returning to the Olympic Games in Rio in 2016 and, promptly but not surprisingly, a significant conflict has emerged caused by the new golf course created for the Olympic tournament. Not only is the city government’s dubious relationship with developers a contentious point, but local residents who are struggling with intermittent water supplies in the midst of one of the worst droughts ever in Brazil uncomprehendingly watch water sprinklers being in full use to keep the Olympic course green.

The emergence of “Occupy Golf” in Rio is a convenient entry point to reflect on the Global Anti-Golf Movement (GAG'M, pronounced gag'em) that was founded in 1993 in response to the frenzied proliferation of resort and golf course development worldwide. One of its first major actions, as we will later see in this essay, was to lobby the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to ban golf permanently from the Olympics.

The following GAG'M story is not an academic discourse but rather a personal account of an anti-golf activist and researcher over a period of more than 20 years. As such, it does not claim to be “objective” or “neutral”. My interest in golf courses and golf tourism began

around 1990 when I was directing an action research project on tourism, development and the environment for the Bangkok-based Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism (ECTWT). While studying the environmental impacts of golf courses and golf tourism as part of my work, I came in contact with many individuals and groups, mainly from the Asia-Pacific region, who later joined forces to take action against the golf boom. That is how I became a co-founder of the movement (representing the Asian tourism activist network ANTENNA) and a member of the original GAG'M core group, along with Gen Morita of the Japan-based Global Network for Anti-Golf Course Action (GNAGA) and Chee Yoke Ling and Maurizio (Farhan) Ferrari of the Malaysia-based Asia-Pacific Peoples' Environment Network (APPEN). Besides researching and writing on golf-related themes, I helped to produce the "GAG'M Updates" that were published twice a year for information and the raising of public awareness. Notably, anti-golf activism emerged at a time when the Internet was still nascent and social media did not exist. The GAG'M Updates consisted of hundreds of pages of newspaper clippings, articles and documents that were sent by "snail mail" or faxed to us from all over the world. Today, it would be hardly possible to give a historic account of the movement in the first years of its existence without the GAG'M Updates prints because most of the information never made it to the Internet. However, there has been considerable confusion among Internet users over the appearance of a website² and, more recently, a Facebook page,³ which use the name GAG'M. In fact, the original GAG'M has never had any links with these newer initiatives. This essay will focus on the work of GAG'M from its foundation in 1993 until 1997 when the Asian financial crisis caused a sharp decline in Southeast Asia's golf industry. Even though the movement was thereafter no longer visible as before, the GAG'M core group has continued to be active as the forces of globalization have kept pushing golf towards new expropriations and local communities are still seeking support in their struggle against unwanted and damaging golf projects.

How It All Began

The idea to form an international people's alliance against golf courses and golf tourism was born in December 1992 in Phuket, southern Thailand, at an international civil society event called "Peoples Forum on Tourism" organized by the ECTWT in cooperation with Thai civic groups. The meeting was part of the Asia-Pacific "People's Plan for the 21st Century (PP21)", a comprehensive civil society programme that aimed at building a trans-border movement of hope among ordinary people, like fishermen, farmers, women, workers and other marginalized social groups.

In Phuket, tourism activists and representatives from local communities affected by mass tourism identified and discussed the widespread construction of golf resorts which was a significant common issue not only affecting Asian tourist destinations but communities worldwide.⁴ Governments tended to give full support to golf course and resort development in the belief that they would raise their country's global image, attract investors and bring in tourist dollars. But often, such projects simply created skewed land use and deprived local residents of land and resources they depended on.

Thailand was experiencing a major "golf rush" at that time with more than 100 new golf course projects in the planning and construction stages. The Thai Golf Association and the Tourism Authority in Thailand, which were jointly gearing up for a "Visit Thailand Golf

Year 1993”, had announced that hundreds of new courses were needed to meet the demand. The government’s aim was to turn Thailand into a “playground” for high-spending golfing tourists, especially from golf-addicted Japan.⁵ Worldwide, there were around 25,000 courses. The USA alone had 13,600 courses for around 25 million golfers,⁶ whereas Japan had approximately 2000 courses for 17 million players with an additional 1600 courses under construction or in the planning stage by the end of 1993.⁷

Three activist networks that were represented at the tourism forum in Phuket—GNAGA, APPEN and ANTENNA—jointly organized the first Global Conference on Golf Course and Resort Development in Penang, Malaysia, from 26 to 28 April 1993. At this event, delegates from Hawaii, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand resolved that golf could no longer be considered as simply a sport, as it primarily served the interests of the elites and promoted an arrogant and wasteful lifestyle. Case studies from various countries showed that the major losers were ordinary citizens whose governments ignored the high social and environmental costs of golf courses and favoured developers even if they breached the law and committed human rights violations. The conference concluded with the launch of the GAG’M and the declaration of 29 April as “World No Golf Day” in order to convey a clear message: “In this age of increasing environmental awareness, there is no more room on Earth to destroy nature for the sake of a mere game”.⁸

Concerns Raised by GAG’M

One grave concern, clearly, was the environmental impact of golf courses. In the Penang Conference statement, the courses were described as “another form of monoculture, where exotic soil and grass, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides and weedicides, as well as machinery are all imported to substitute natural ecosystems. These landscaped foreign systems create stress on local water supplies and soil, at the same time being highly vulnerable to disease and pest attacks”.⁹ Loss of forest and farm lands, destruction of wetlands, depletion of water resources, soil contamination from run-off of silt and toxic chemicals as well as air pollution from spraying pesticides in the courses were continuously reported from many countries.

Various issues of social justice were identified: unethical or illegal land acquisition practices for golf course development, disruption and displacement of local communities; exploding prices for land; escalating rents; increasing gaps between rich and poor; human rights violations, corruption and crime. Sexism and the precarious working conditions of women caddies, particularly in Southeast Asia’s golf courses, were another area of concern.¹⁰ Caddies were so poorly paid that they often relied on golfers’ tips. Thailand already had a reputation as a sex tourism destination and it was conspicuous that the predominantly male golfers required the services of young women to carry around their very heavy bags, their umbrellas and chairs, their drinks and mobile phones. Unfortunately, Thailand became the “model” with the marketing and exploitation of female caddies used to bait golf tourists spreading to other Asian countries.

While the opportunity costs were high, it was evident that local communities derived few economic benefits from golf course development and golf tourism. Since golf course construction and maintenance were extremely expensive with developers heavily depending on loans, investments and imports from abroad, most of the revenues did not

trickle down to the local economy but were kept by large companies. As was pointed out in the GAG'M Statement, "At the heart of the golf industry is a multi-billion dollar industry involving transnational corporations, including agribusiness, construction firms, consultancies, golf equipment manufacturers, airlines, hotel chains, real estate companies, advertising and public relations firms as well as financial institutions".¹¹

GAG'M activists also highlighted the drive by Japanese companies for golf course development in foreign countries and, related to this, the transformation of golf memberships into a valuable commodity, which resulted in widespread speculation and dubious practices. In the words of Japanese anti-golf campaigners: "the game being played most earnestly here is the money game".¹² The speculative nature of memberships and associated property transactions turned golf into a financially unsound, high-risk business. Thus, it was not surprising that many golf course and resort projects went bankrupt when the economic bubble burst in Japan at the beginning of the 1990s.

In view of the multi-dimensional problems associated with golf, the GAG'M founding conference demanded an immediate moratorium on all golf course developments as well as an end to development aid, advertising and the promotion of golf courses and golf tourism. In addition, it welcomed the decision of the IOC to reject the inclusion of golf as an Olympic "sport" in the 1996 Atlanta Games and urged the IOC to introduce a permanent ban on golf as an Olympic "sport", reasoning that "this would amount to the legitimization and international recognition of a 'sport' which destroys the environment, creates social disruptions and which is financially unsound".¹³

On 29 April 1993, the first World No Golf Day, four GAG'M representatives presented the outcome of the Penang Conference at a press conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Simultaneously, anti-golf activists and support groups marked the "golf-free" day with various activities in Thailand, Hawaii, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, India, Nepal, Taiwan, Australia, Switzerland and the UK. The activities varied from public awareness raising campaigns, discussions and debates, and the planting of trees to peaceful walks and demonstrations by farmers, students and citizens groups in India, Indonesia and Japan.¹⁴

The Asian "Golf War"

Media interest in golf-related problems was remarkable, with their coverage generally supportive of the issues raised by anti-golf activists. National and international newspapers and magazines—including *Newsweek*,¹⁵ *The Guardian*,¹⁶ *New Scientist*¹⁷ and *The Economist*¹⁸—all highlighted the issues GAG'M addressed.

The Australian carried an article noting: "A glut of golf courses is spreading across Asia from Indonesia to Singapore to satisfy rich businessmen and the social set. Tourism is booming but the effects on the poor and the environment are devastating".¹⁹

Stating that the world was increasingly "colonized by golf", the *New Scientist* opined that "golf courses are emerging as one of the most rapacious and socially divisive forms of tourist and property development".²⁰

A cover story in *Asia Magazine* that featured GAG'M as demanding "rough justice" reported that: "The backlash against golf courses is really the result of a problem reaching critical mass. For when a motley crew of conservation-minded groups gathered in

Penang..., the impact of Asia's golfing boom had grown severe enough to coalesce them into an anti-golf movement".²¹

Meanwhile, forceful evictions of local residents and clashes between golf course opponents and developers backed by state authorities frequently made the headlines. Of all the countries in Asia, the Indonesian experience was the one most overtly linked to the suppression of local people by its government. The campaign against the Cimacan golf resort project in West Java, which had started in 1989 and involved hundreds of families as well as supporting students and environmental groups, became famous for the peasants' fierce determination to defend their land rights. Eventually, the project grew so unpopular that it was shelved.²² Cimacan was not an isolated case in land-scarce Java, where most Indonesian golf course sites were located. Course developers, who sought to acquire large tracts of land for their projects, inevitably clashed with peasants who had been tilling the land for generations. A serious incident happened on 14 April 1993—just a few days before the first "World No Golf Day"—when 800 people from four villages in the district of Ciawi, West Java, peacefully demonstrated against plans to transform their farm plots into a luxury golf resort, arguing that the 257 hectare site was ancestral land and should continue to be used for agriculture. Military and police forces broke up the protest and arrested 14 villagers. On 29 April, the Indonesian "Movement against Golf Course Development" (KAAPLG) was established in the capital Jakarta, and a rally was staged outside parliament. The anti-golf activists called for a nationwide moratorium on golf course development, complaining that thousands of hectares of productive agricultural lands would be lost within five years if all golf course projects would be implemented as planned.²³

The "golf war" in Indonesia continued unabated throughout 1993, particularly in Bogor, West Java. In Cijayanti, 329 families were forced from their land to pave the way for a golf course development. In Rancamaya, some 1000 families lost their land and livelihoods for another golf project. After learning about a violent land conflict between a golf course developing company PT Light Instrumendo and farmers in Citeureup district, Bogor, West Java, GAG'M stepped in and wrote a letter to petition Indonesian President Soeharto. Expressing their dismay at police siding with the company and ignoring the unfair treatment of poor farmers who were criminalized and called communists because they had resisted eviction, GAG'M appealed to the President to use his position to help bring about a peaceful and just solution in the Citeureup land dispute.²⁴ The activists and farmers who had been arrested during the protests were later released. But the farmers lost their land and the golf course was eventually built.

In India, there was strong local resistance to plans to build eight golf courses in Goa, and a major concern with the large-scale Japanese Holiday Village project that included a course. Protests were spearheaded by the "Vigilant Goan Army" (JGF)—an action group fighting socially and environmentally damaging tourism - and included local women rights organizations.²⁵ Many women were against golf course projects with water issues being a main concern to them. On World No Golf 1993, women protesters carried empty pots as symbols to express their concern that golf courses would worsen the water shortage crisis in many villages of Goa. The experience of Thailand, where research had found that an average golf course consumed 6500 cubic meters of water per day showed this was equivalent to the daily demand of 60,000 villagers.²⁶

Most significant in the Goan anti-golf struggle was the implementation of a “people’s ban of developers”, which worked as follows: the land earmarked for golf course projects was either owned privately or by the community, and course developers usually tried to get the Goan Government to “acquire” the land for them ostensibly for “public purposes” through the Land Acquisition Act. But these attempts were now effectively blocked by village assemblies that passed resolutions against such government measures. This way, all eight golf course projects in Goa could be stopped.²⁷

Fortunately, the Asian “golf war” remained in most cases a war of words. Golf protagonists often reacted harshly to criticism, and labels for anti-golf course campaigners ranged from “anti-green greenies”, “killjoys”, “environmental extremists”, “linksophobes”, “morons” to “cold war losers”.²⁸ However, there was also support from unexpected places. For instance, President Kim Young Sam of South Korea vowed in May 1993 to lay down his golf clubs until his term would expire in 1998 and expressed the view that golf “does more harm than good in today’s South Korea, which needs to hunker down and work”.²⁹ A survey conducted in South Korea had revealed that 80 % of the public opposed the boom in golf course construction in the country. Three months later, in China, set to become the next golf frontier at that time, the governing state council ordered a halt to golf course development as part of a campaign against wasteful spending.³⁰

A particularly powerful “weapon” used against the often seemingly omnipotent golf lobby was a documentary produced in Thailand, which confronted viewers head-on with the inconvenient truth about golf and its social and environmental impacts. Entitled “Green Menace: The Untold Story of Golf” produced by Thai journalist Ing K and American environmental investigator Brian Bennett, the film was released in 1993 and won in the same year the First Prize for Environmental Documentary at the Suffolk/New York Film Festival. It was shown at other international film festivals and at a public symposium in Tokyo organized by GAG’M in connection with its 2nd International Conference on Resort and Golf Course Development in March 1994.

Some of the issues covered in the film—particularly the involvement of high-ranked military officers and crime syndicates in golf course construction, widespread land encroachment and theft of water from public water reservoirs for the maintenance of courses in Thailand—were highly sensitive; this is probably the reason why Thai authorities have never permitted it to be shown in the country’s mass media.

“Green Menace” included a revealing interview with a Thai water resource engineer who quit working for golf courses after witnessing first-hand all the problems they caused. Among other things, he explained: “I saw outrageous exploitation. [One] golf course usurped a water source that was used by three to four villages of over 1,000 people. ‘Go find another one, this is mine now!’ Just like that. The villagers suffer, but can do nothing. The golf course owners are influential people with everything in their power, including high government officials”.³¹

The excessive use of chemicals in golf courses was also addressed in the film. Golf course workers and caddies complained of often falling sick with symptoms of acute pesticide poisoning. A medical doctor confirmed that some of the chemicals used in Thailand’s courses, such as the weed-killer paraquat, could cause severe illness and miscarriage. GAG’M campaigner Gen Morita who used to be a golf player himself warned viewers that golfers are usually not aware that they are “playing in poison”.³²

Golf superstar and course architect Jack Nicklaus was also interviewed in “Green Menace”. In fact, Nicklaus had been involved in Thailand’s best-known golf course scandal. When a Thai newspaper published a photo showing Nicklaus hitching a ride on a Thai Air Force helicopter to survey the site of the Golden Valley golf resort project some 250 km northeast of Bangkok, which he himself had designed, there were allegations of misusing public funds. The situation escalated when Golden Valley’s construction crews dynamited a state-owned mountain, cleared a forest and encroached upon Khao Yai National Park to build the golf course. When Nicklaus was asked by the filmmaker about golf-related problems in Thailand, he remained in denial and instead enthused: “You’ve got great land. You’ve got plenty of water, with the amount of rain that you have. Certainly, you don’t have problems from our standpoint”.³³

Highlights of “World No Golf Year 1994”

When the news broke in December 1993 that another application had been submitted to the IOC to include golf in the 2000 Sydney Games after it had been dropped from the 1996 Atlanta Games, GAG’M submitted a petition to then IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch, reiterating concerns about golf being a sport and calling for a permanent ban of golf from the Olympics. It said: “We realize, and resist, the commercialization of sports, which is driven by powerful profit-seeking corporate interests. Golf promotion, in particular, has been frenzied. In addition to environmental destruction, golf is deepening the gap between the rich and poor in developing countries, juxtaposing elitist and arrogant lifestyles against traditional cultures and basic needs of local people”.³⁴

An editorial in the Bangkok newspaper *The Nation* echoed the GAG’M call: “Keep golf out of the Sydney 2000 Games”. It noted: “For an international institution as highly regarded as the Olympics to accept golf as an Olympic sport would give the business a big boost, while making a farce of its own ideals: fitness, health, fairness and the glorification of amateur athletes—playing sports for its own sake, not for money or status... From its origins as a simple, pastoral sport, golf has become corrupted. Its existence as a sport can no longer be separated from its role in destroying the environment and local communities”.³⁵

At the 2nd International Conference on Resort and Golf Course Development, co-organized by GAG’M and local groups in Japan in March 1994, participants from 12 countries raised strong criticisms regarding the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano. In a symbolic gesture, the delegates bought tree saplings to be planted in Nagano City in support of the resistance shown by Japanese people to the massive developments related to the Games. The aim was to draw international attention to the way in which forests and farmland, which local communities had nurtured and safeguarded for generations, were being destroyed for this mega-sports event. The related GAG’M Press Release stated: “For just ‘16 days of glory’ large amounts of public money are being invested in building extensive infrastructural developments, which include golf and ski resorts, the Hokuriku Shinkansen (Bullet Train) railway project, hotels, etc. that only benefits vested interests, chiefly the Kokudo Group owned by Mr. Yoshiaki Tsutumi”.³⁶

The strategy of GAG’M was to make its presence felt in Japan, as it was the centre of the global golf mania at that time. Campaigners from around the world came together there to raise awareness among the Japanese public and to meet with government and industry

representatives in order to question and petition them concerning their involvement in resort and golf course development in foreign countries. The fact that GAG'M hardly had the means to organize a major event in expensive Japan could not deter them. American journalist James Fahn, who accompanied GAG'M delegates in Japan, wrote: “[GAG'M is comprised of] seasoned activists. But they have come together as a result of pressure from the grassroots. A striking element of any anti-golf gathering is the testimony of ordinary people, often farmers, who have bravely fought the construction of golf courses in their communities despite the powerful forces behind development. Also of note is the movement's poverty. The conference was held at a youth training centre where participants slept in dorm rooms and ate in a cafeteria along with the members of a 100-piece orchestra from a local girls' school.”³⁷

Before the anti-golf conference started in the small fishing village of Kamogawa in Chiba (the province that was known as “Golf Ginza”), delegates held talks in Tokyo with officials of the Japanese International Trade and Industry Ministry and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) as well as the Taisei Corporation that was building and operating a number of golf courses overseas. At that time, Japan was already experiencing a sharp decline of the golf industry, including the golf membership market, due to the country's economic crisis. This, together with a strong national citizens movement, led to the cancellation of some 700 golf course projects nationwide by the end of 1993, 924 courses (in the planning stage or under construction) by the end of 1994 and over 1000 by the end of 1995.³⁸ However, Japanese developers were still aggressively pushing development outside the country—for example, China, Indochina, and India in Asia, in Australia and even in Europe. A number of Japanese overseas projects were stopped by joint actions of the Japan-based GNAGA, GAG'M and local groups. Especially in Hawaii, Japanese golf companies such as the Royal Hawaiian Country Club, Sokan, Obayashi Gumi, Kato, Nansei and Shalon—many of which were linked to the Yakuza (Japanese crime syndicates)—were forced to stop and withdraw from developments.³⁹

As a step forward from the first “World No Golf Day” in 1993, the GAG'M conference in Japan launched a “World No Golf Year 1994”.⁴⁰ In the following months, GAG'M continued to campaign on a wide range of issues. Monitoring the expansion of tourism-related golf businesses to Indochina, Burma and China, GAG'M wrote letters to heads of state—for example, Prime Minister Khamtay Siphandone of Laos⁴¹ and Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet of Vietnam⁴²—to inform them about the dangers of golf courses and petition them to help stop these controversial projects. GAG'M also joined the international boycott campaign against a “Visit Myanmar Year 1996” in military-ruled Burma and published articles to condemn land grabs and human rights violations in relation to tourist resort and golf course construction in that country.⁴³ Moreover, cases were publicized of land-hungry golf course builders affecting Indigenous Peoples' rights in the Philippines, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Hawaii. Last, although not least, the spotlight was once again turned on Indonesia, where Balinese farmers, students, environmentalists and religious groups were fighting a fierce battle against the building of the Bali Nirwana Golf Resort next to Hindu sacred sites and the Tanah Lot temple.⁴⁴

GAG'M Expansion to the USA and Europe

In the USA, GAG'M joined hands with the Environmental Coalition of Ventura County in California to take legal action in 1994 against a Japanese golf course project in Ojai Valley.⁴⁵ Links were established with citizens' groups to fight the Pebble Beach Company (PBC) that was then owned by the Lone Cypress Company, formed by the Japanese Sumitomo Bank and Taiheiyo Club. The PBC planned to develop a golf course on property they owned on the Monterey Peninsula in California, which would have resulted in the destruction of an old pine tree forest in Pescadero Canyon. Local protesters called for the protection of the pristine and unique Jeffers Forest area as a nature reserve, as they feared that the development of the forest would mean the irreplaceable loss of an ancient ecosystem and its genetic archive.⁴⁶ In 1999, Hollywood star Clint Eastwood became the major investor in PBC along with golf celebrities like Arnold Palmer and Tiger Woods. Nevertheless, the battle against the golf course expansion and the building of a 160-room luxury hotel for golfers continued until 2007, when the California Coastal Commission eventually turned down PBC's application on environmental grounds. Dave Dilworth, director of the local Helping Our Peninsula's Environment (HOPE) group and US representative of GAG'M, who had led the Pebble Beach protest from the beginning, rejoiced: "The magnificent dark green cloak covering our Monterey Peninsula is saved from Clint's and Pebble Beach Company's Chainsaw Massacre".⁴⁷

On the US East Coast, GAG'M allied with citizens groups in New York and the Coalition for Forests who were fighting a huge golf course scheme on Long Island. The plan included the privatization of existing public golf courses and the building of several new courses on Suffolk parklands. Local residents called for the project to be terminated, arguing it would decimate scarce and significant remnants of Long Island's once-abundant forests and result in air and water contamination from the use of toxic substances in the golf courses.⁴⁸

In Europe, the UK had been experiencing a major golf boom since the late 1980s. It possessed 2157 courses in 1990; that was an increase of more than 50 % on Europe's existing courses. In 1991, 1800 planning applications for new courses had been submitted to local authorities in the UK alone. Had all these projects been realized, an area the size of the Isle of Wight would have been swallowed up by golf courses, according to the Council for the Protection of Rural England. However, due to worsening economic conditions and increased public protests, less than 350 golf courses were actually completed between 1988 and 1993.⁴⁹

A major victory for the British anti-golf course movement was the withdrawal of the Japanese Kosaido company which had plans to build a second golf course in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty near Liphook, Hampshire. Local people with access rights to this registered common land fought the scheme for five years.⁵⁰ With additional pressure from national environmental groups and GAG'M, Kosaido was eventually forced to cancel its project in December 1993.

Another area in Europe specially targeted by golf course developers was the Alps region, spanning seven countries: Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland. There were plans to increase the number of courses from 160 in 1993 to 300 in 1995, prompting resistance from community groups and environmentalists who expressed concerns about building courses in biodiversity-rich and ecologically fragile areas, particularly in mountainous terrains featuring rare alpine flora and fauna and forests

and wetlands.⁵¹ In Switzerland, GAG'M partnered with the Working Group Tourism & Development (AKTE) and the Swiss Foundation for Landscape Conservation to highlight the “seamy” side of the golf boom, including the privatization of public forests and wilderness areas, disputes over land distribution, conversion of agricultural land and conservation conflicts.⁵²

GAG'M also responded to calls from golf course critics in Slovenia. In February 1995, GAG'M wrote letters to petition the Slovenian government to heed the concerns of local citizens, environmental groups and the scientific research community regarding two proposed golf course projects in ecologically sensitive wetland areas along the Drava River near Ptuj town.⁵³ Both courses had been pushed forward in great haste without adequately informing the public and undertaking an Environmental Impact Assessment. Due to increasing public pressure, these projects were soon cancelled.

In April 1995, GAG'M and a number of European groups—Tourism Concern in the UK and AKTE in Switzerland among others—launched a letter writing campaign to the Prime Minister of Greece, Andreas Papandreou, to protest against the construction of a golf course and a hotel complex at the Butterfly Gorge in the southeastern part of Crete. They pointed out that the last remaining pine forest stretching from the coast to the mountains, a precious butterfly habitat and place of natural beauty that visitors came to enjoy, should not be destroyed for the sake of golf tourism.⁵⁴

Anti-Golf Solidarity from Hawaii to Mexico

On the occasion of the third World No Golf Day on 29 April 1995, GAG'M launched an international campaign against the controversial “The Villages of Hokukano” golf resort project (later renamed in Hokuli'a golf resort) in South Kona, on Hawaii Island. The project was operated by the Hawaiian joint venture company Oceanside, in which Japan Airlines (JAL) held 75 % of the interest. The massive tourism scheme included over 1000 luxury villas, a private members' lodge of up to 100 units and a 27-hole golf course that was to be designed, once again, by Jack Nicklaus.

Local residents opposed the JAL-led project from the start out of fear that the nearby pristine National Marine Life Refuge at Kealahou would be damaged and the local agricultural lifestyle degraded. Native Hawaiians (Kanaka Maoli), in particular, were up in arms because the project would have involved the loss of their ancestral land and ocean natural resources, and violated their traditional access and gathering rights to these resources for their livelihood. Furthermore, many Kanaka Maoli's archaeological features, including burial sites, would have been desecrated and, perhaps, destroyed by the construction of golfing facilities and luxury homes, around and on top of the sites.

Apart from many protest actions in Hawaii—including rallies at the Waikiki JAL Office in Honolulu—as well as citizens filing a lawsuit at the Circuit Court against the Hawaii County government that had approved the first phase of construction, GAG'M joined the local opposition movement to call for a boycott of JAL to increase pressure on the company to withdraw from the project.⁵⁵ With JAL already hampered by financial problems and accusations of mismanagement, the Japanese Transport Minister publicly stated in September 1994 that JAL's tourism venture in Hawaii was a failure. Yet, Oceanside did not give up and between 1998 and 2003 spent more than US\$190 million on the project's development. As late as 2003, after almost a decade of people's struggles, the

court finally ruled the embattled project illegal. According to the judge, Oceanside did not have the government approvals it needed to establish a private, luxury resort residential subdivision on its property.⁵⁶

In September 1995, GAG'M received an emergency call concerning one of the most violent "golf wars" it had ever heard of. In Tepoztlan, Mexico, a joint venture of Mexican and American developers had been given the green light to build a US\$311-million resort including an 18-hole golf course, also designed by the ubiquitous Jack Nicklaus, inside of El Tepozteco National Park, in the state of Morelos, south of Mexico City.⁵⁷ Apart from the fact that the El Tepozteco Golf Club development was slated to be built in a protected area, it was estimated that the golf course would have consumed more than 4000 cubic meters of water a day, about five times the amount consumed by the entire town of Tepoztlan. In addition, concerns were raised about the potential impact of the course's heavy use of agrochemicals.

By the end of August 1995, locals opposing the project seized the town hall of Tepoztlan and took several officials hostage, hanging them in effigy. After 12 days of protest, the mayor, who had approved the controversial El Tepozteco scheme, resigned. Meanwhile, international support groups—among them a coalition of American environmentalists including Ralph Nader and executives of the US Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace USA and the Sierra Club—called on the developing companies, GTE Data Services and Jack Nicklaus' Golden Bear Course Management, to withdraw their participation from the disputed project.⁵⁸

On 10 April 1996, squads of heavily armed police ambushed busloads of anti-golf course campaigners from Tepoztlan, who were travelling to express their grievances to the then Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo. There were shootings that left one protester dead and 20 more injured. The incident that was video-taped and broadcast on television resulted in the arrest of six police officers allegedly responsible for the violence. There was a storm of protest with GAG'M and many other local and international action groups sending appeals to President Zedillo to carry out a thorough investigation of this incident and to bring the killers to justice. It was only in the wake of this violence that the developers cancelled the El Tepozteco project. On 29 April 1996, the fourth World No Golf Day, the protesters gathered at the project site and held a ceremony to honour Marcus Olmedo, the 62-year-old man who was killed in the shootings.⁵⁹

Confronting Jack Nicklaus

On the occasion of the fourth World No Golf Day, GAG'M addressed an open letter to Jack Nicklaus saying that as President of the Golden Bear International Company, he had to take some of the responsibility for the El Tepozteco debacle because he had chosen to ignore all earlier appeals to withdraw from the misguided project.⁶⁰ The GAG'M letter also denounced Nicklaus' involvement in other harmful golf course developments, for example, the JAL-led golf resort project at South Kona, Hawaii; the Golden Valley project in Thailand; the Manila Southwoods Golf & Country Club in Cavite, Philippines, which had involved the forced evictions of hundreds of farmers in 1991; the Andaman Club, a golf-plus-casino resort in military-run Burma, a pariah state that was subjected to economic sanctions by the international community; and the Jack Nicklaus II golf course project near Bangalore in India, which had been scrapped in 1994 due to vigorous protests by

neighbouring communities. With the letter, GAG'M was sending a clear message that it was high time for Nicklaus to acknowledge the problems his golf projects had created and needed to consider their consequences. It said: "Your career as a golf player has already made you famous and rich; you have even been given the title 'Golfer of the Century'. Therefore, we fail to understand that for an honorarium of US\$2 million per project as a golf course designer, you are spoiling your reputation by participating in all these ecologically and socially devastating ventures. Worse, some of these business deals have implied the involvement of unscrupulous developing companies, corrupt officials, and dictatorial regimes who have no concerns for safeguarding the environment and people's wellbeing and rights".⁶¹ Nicklaus did not respond.

Rebutting the Golf Industry's "Green-Wash"

Due to the worldwide and growing anti-golf activism and more informed public discussion on the negative consequences of resort and golf course construction, golf's image had been considerably tarnished. Influential agencies such as the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP, based in Bangkok) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) acknowledged the serious problems caused by the golf boom. In the section on tourism in ESCAP's 1995 report about the "State of the Environment in Asia and the Pacific", it was stated: "Perhaps the best example of the impacts of mass commercial tourism is provided by the promotion and massive growth of golf tourism. Golf course construction has created widespread negative social, cultural and environmental impacts, particularly in the developing countries of the region. Typical impacts include forest destruction, and air, water and soil pollution caused by the excessive use of chemicals. Furthermore, in some cases, local people have been deprived of rights to land, disrupting communities and endangering their livelihoods".⁶²

The golf industry responded to such critical discourses with overzealous, well-funded public relations activities. From 1994 onwards, the number of international conferences organized by golf advocates to parade golf as a "green and clean" sport increased significantly. North American and European "green golf course experts", in the service of the golf industry, made tenacious attempts in the media and on all possible occasions to pre-empt and discredit the arguments of golf critics and to promote the idea of environmentally friendly and pesticide-free golf courses. The European Golf Association's Ecology Unit, funded by the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews, the PGA European Tour and the European Golf Association and led by British ecologist David Stubbs (who was later appointed as Head of Sustainability for the London 2012 Olympic Games), stated in one of its glossy booklets, for example: "Golf is accused of being harmful to the environment—by using too many chemicals, too much water, damaging wildlife habitats and the landscape, and being generally anti-social. Most of this is technically unfounded and appears to mask socio-political objections. However, the overall effect is a very poor environmental image and this inevitably influences public opinion and regulatory bodies".⁶³

GAG'M took up the challenge and intensified its efforts to expose the "green myths" being created by the international golf lobby. They argued that the drive by the US Golf Association (USGA), the European Golf Association (EGA) and other golf-promoting organizations to design and promote environmentally friendly strategies for courses were

insufficient and were primarily aimed at protecting the industry's commercial interests. Proposals for purportedly ecologically sound course management—for example, improvements of landscaping and methods to reduce high consumption of water and chemicals—were repudiated as incomplete, superficial and cosmetic, as they were limited to mostly technical measures while a wide range of serious problems such as land grabs, loss of pristine biodiversity-rich areas and fertile farmlands, and displacement of communities remained unaddressed.

A high-profile “Golf and Environment” conference was held at the Pebble Beach golf course in California, USA in January 1995, which aimed to get endorsement for their “green golf” strategies from environmental groups. Local golf course critics attended and distributed a GAG’M statement to participants and organizers urging them “to tell the truth” and to present a complete picture of the environmental impacts of golf.⁶⁴ In fact, it was seen as a great irony—and a reflection of the reality of the golf industry—that the conference was held at the same Pebble Beach that had sparked a huge environmental conflict with its course expansion project. It was also pointed out in the letter that the adoption of international standards for golf courses as developed by the USGA was utterly insufficient and the claims made for golf’s potential to comply with the principles of sustainable development were untenable.⁶⁵

Another significant event in the history of the GAG’M was the World Congress on Sport & Environment co-organized by Spanish government agencies and the IOC in Barcelona from 20 to 23 March 1996, which included a session on environmentally friendly golf courses, with David Stubbs of the EGA Ecology Unit as a panelist. GAG’M contributed a statement to the conference, entitled “Green Fees: The Environmental and Social Costs of Golf Courses”, reiterating golf’s negative impacts and questioning the procedures of the industry-driven EGA Ecology Unit that had constantly played down the critical environmental and social dimensions of golf course development.⁶⁶ The Statement urged Congress participants to present an accurate and complete picture of harmful sports, golf in particular, and to consider a moratorium on all destructive sports facilities, including golf courses. It also renewed its call on the IOC to remain firm in objecting golf as an Olympic sport.⁶⁷

Greenpeace Spain, who sent delegates to the Congress and distributed the GAG’M Statement to participants, reported that a lively debate took place between “green” golf course promoters and locals who contested golf projects’ environmental sustainability, particularly in a country like Spain where people had been suffering tremendous hardship from serious drought. In 1995 alone, 10 million Spaniards, or one quarter of the total population, had faced water restrictions, whereas the golf courses in and around Madrid had consumed as much water as a community of 135,000 people.⁶⁸

Anti-Golf Action Then and Now

Asian golf courses and related property developments faced a serious downturn in fortune during the financial crisis of 1997. Due to its speculative nature, the golf industry was a major contributor to the bubble economy, and when the bubble burst, it became one of the first victims. “Ask any golfer: what goes up must come down”, said an article in *The Economist* at that time. “[Golf is] a symptom of a social, political, economic and environmental malaise whose effects are only just beginning to be felt. Many theories have

been put forward to explain why the economic progress of Southeast Asia has so suddenly left the fairway: the forces of globalization; misguided economic policies; exclusive and unresponsive political systems; a pursuit of growth at the expense of everything else, including the environment and the livelihoods of the poor. The phenomenon of golf unites all these hypotheses”.⁶⁹ The outcome was devastating for many property developers. In Thailand, for example, three golf courses, once valued at the equivalent of US\$200 million, were on the market in November 1997 for a mere US\$18 million.⁷⁰

The crisis of “Asian golf course capitalism” also resulted in a slowdown of the anti-golf movement in the region as the most active campaign groups were based here. However, GAG’M has continued—albeit to a lesser extent—to monitor, expose and challenge golf course development and golf tourism.⁷¹

In a number of cases, GAG’M’s involvement followed requests to support, what often began as, very localized struggles against golf course projects. In 2006, GAG’M joined hands with a broad alliance of local residents and environmentalists from across the world to protest a mega-golf and casino resort in a biodiversity-rich mangrove area in North Bimini, the Bahamas.⁷² Letters were written to the Bahamian authorities and the Hilton Hotel Group that was involved in developing and managing the controversial Bimini Bay Resort, to call for a stop of the project and to express full support for the local people’s plan to have a Bimini Marine Protected Area established in the area.⁷³ Due to strong protests, the controversial golf course project was not implemented, but people have been fighting an even bigger and more destructive tourism scheme, the Resorts World Bimini, that is being developed by the Malaysian Genting company. It includes a large cruise ship pier, marinas, a casino and a luxury resort, and it is rumoured that there is also a plan to build a golf course.⁷⁴

In 2008, GAG’M in cooperation with an alliance of local activists and civic groups in Kerala appealed to the Indian Union Minister of Tourism and Culture to heed local people’s call for a moratorium on all golf course developments in the state of Kerala and for the conversion of a controversial golf course in Trivandrum into a public biodiversity park.⁷⁵ At the time of writing, the dispute in Kerala was unresolved. The Sports Authority of India (SAI) has taken over the Trivandrum Golf Course to develop it into a national golf academy. Critics say the project only benefits an influential group of bureaucrats and business people and want to open the property to the general public.

GAG’M also worked with the environmental organization SAVE in Quintana Roo, Mexico, calling on then President Felipe Calderón and relevant government agencies to implement a moratorium on all new golf course developments along the Mexican Riviera Maya and to take effective measures for the protection of the area’s rich biodiversity and fragile ecosystems.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, it was not possible to stop the most controversial project, the Gran Bahia Principe Resort and Golf Club developed by a Spanish hotel group. It is a luxurious gated community including a Robert Trent Jones II 27-holes golf course that is ranked #3 in all of Mexico.

In 1996, the Washington-based World Watch Institute revealed in a study on “Shrinking Fields” that the rapid proliferation of golf courses around the world was taking food out of the poor people’s mouths.⁷⁷ In the following years, reports surfaced about worsening food shortage crises that eventually led to food riots in some poor countries. Meanwhile, golf courses—often mega-projects embracing hotels, holiday villas, marinas, and shopping

malls—continued to mushroom, particularly in the developing world. GAG’M welcomed government action that prioritized food and water security for common people over golf resorts for wealthy locals and foreigners. In China, for example, in December 2006 the central government imposed a ban on the building of new golf courses, residential villas and race tracks on undeveloped land in order to protect China’s rapidly diminishing farmland. Similarly, some governments of Southeast Asian nations moved to restrict the conversion of rice lands into luxury housing, resorts and golf courses.⁷⁸ In order to draw attention to the issue of golf courses and food security, GAG’M member tim-team and Biothai—a network of Thai civic groups concerned with biodiversity protection and sustainable agriculture—conducted research in Thailand, to calculate how much rice could be produced on the land used for golf courses in the country. It was found that existing golf courses had significantly affected the natural resource base on which Thailand’s agriculture depends, with considerable consequences for food production.⁷⁹

In recent years, GAG’M has observed a dramatic downswing in golf in the wake of the global financial crisis in 2007–2008. The American golf industry is still suffering substantially from an exodus of players and the mass closure of courses. According to the National Golf Foundation, five million Americans left the golf sport over the past decade. Roughly, every two days, a golf course shuts down in the USA, while just 11 courses were opened in 2014.⁸⁰ Also, in Japan, hundreds of golf courses lie abandoned owing to the severe over-development in the recent past. Given their large size and lack of shade, renewable energy companies have recently begun to use them as solar farms.⁸¹

Yet, golf protagonists remain optimistic, as in some parts of the developing world, golf course development is still on the rise. Moreover, with golf eventually becoming an Olympic sport in 2016, industry insiders like Jack Nicklaus expect a new boom time for golf.⁸² In China, for instance, the decision to add golf to the Olympic programme has meant more money for golf from the state-run sport system and the prospect of building hundreds, if not thousands, new courses in the country.⁸³

Golf is “a dangerous game” and stands as a symbol for environment and social justice abuses, excess, greed and self-delusion of the rich and powerful.⁸⁴ That is why GAG’M and many other groups have been actively opposing it for so many years. Golf’s comeback as an Olympic sport is likely to give fresh impetus for the movement. The powerful actions of “Ocupa Golf” in Rio de Janeiro, which has drawn the attention of the international media and received support from environmental and human rights groups in and outside Brazil, are promising signs. GAG’M has lots of knowledge and experience to share with the people who are fighting against unjust and unsustainable golf-related projects. Since it came into being, it has successfully presented a golf narrative from an environmental and social justice perspective and initiated educational campaigns and actions such as “World No Golf Day”, all of which have helped to increase the public’s awareness on the many critical aspects of golf. Even though it was clear from the beginning that GAG’M could not achieve its professed goals to bring about a worldwide moratorium on golf course construction and a ban on golf tourism promotion, it was nevertheless able to put the powerful golf lobby on the defensive and to step up pressure on governments and developers. Through direct and legal action, many controversial projects were stopped. As the director of the documentary “A Dangerous Game” Anthony Baxter commented, it is “incredibly tough” to fight the Goliaths of golf but “when the Davids get together and they

form a very impressive group of people who will fight together, then they have more of a chance”.⁸⁵ Indeed, what can be learned from the GAG’M story is: when thoughtful and committed citizens and groups unite and jointly take action for a common cause, they can make a significant difference.

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