



Image courtesy golfstinks.blogspot.com/2011/08/golfing-in-tropicsat-wrong-time-of-year

Mega-Resorts, Golf Courses and Food Crisis

Tourism Investigation & Monitoring Team (tim-team), January 2009

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Why it is Urgent to Call For a Moratorium on Mega-Resorts

By Anita Pleumarom

Land conversions for large-scale tourism complexes and golf courses are unreasonable and irresponsible. The lure of quick cash from tourism and real estate projects has significantly reduced the amount of land suitable for food production, particularly in Third World countries ([see also #2](#)). Not only do “land grabs” by resort and real estate developers pose a rampant problem the world over, “sea grabs” for the development of commercial water-based tourism activities such as cruising, boating and diving, have also become common place. The rapid proliferation of mega-resorts that often include hotels, residential housing, golf courses, marinas, shopping centres, entertainment facilities and even landing strips for private jets, wreaks havoc to the natural environment and affects the lives and livelihoods of millions of small-scale farmers and fisherfolks around the world.

Increasing Food Insecurity

Contrary to the claims of industry and government leaders that tourism brings progress and prosperity to poor regions, efforts to battle hunger and poverty are being undermined by the massive land use change from food-producing land and marine areas to tourism zones. The ability of poor countries to meet the [Millenium Development Goals](#) must be put into question, if tourism expansion continues to take place as it has done in recent years.

In October, Dr **He Changchui**, Assistant Director General and the FAO Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok, published an alarming article in the Bangkok Post (28 Oct. 2008) about the global economic meltdown and increasing hunger problems. Under the headline “*Twin crises of finance, food may prove catastrophic,*” he wrote, “*Food availability and affordability are the bedrocks of any society. During the Great Depression, Black October, and Asian Economic Crisis, food prices were at historic lows. No matter how dire the situation, food was still plentiful.*” But this time it is different, argued Dr He. “*Food is in shorter supply; prices have been steadily climbing since 2001, and have escalated dramatically since 2006.*” In combination with an economic crisis of the enormity taking place today, the impact can be devastating. “*Food shortages and runaway food price inflation have a history of leading to social unrest and political upheaval,*” said Dr He. “*The current crisis has already sparked riots and social turbulence in over 30 countries... In*

2007 alone, the food crisis threw an additional 75 million people into the ranks of the malnourished.”

According to a joint study by the FAO and the World Bank conducted in ASEAN countries, smallholders in the traditional farming system, who are typically poor and unlikely to survive the aggressive wave of globalization, account for more than 80 % of the agricultural population. This shows how important the production of staple food is for the economic and rural development in this region. Instead of further boosting unproductive and unsustainable tourism and service sectors, governments need to secure the livelihoods of small farmers and fisherfolks. As Dr He rightly argued, the farmers’ *“success puts food on our tables,”* and therefore, *“policies that support agriculture, making it sustainable, rewarding and sufficiently productive to support us all must be adopted with urgency.”*

Land Grabs Smack of Neo-Colonialism

Activists lobbying for farmer’s rights recently deplored that resource-hungry nations are snapping up huge tracts of land in poor nations and warned the ongoing global land grab will worsen poverty and malnutrition. In Asia, for example, **China and South Korea as well as Middle Eastern nations flush with petrodollars are driving the trend to sign up rights to swathes of territory in Asia** and Africa, said a recently published report by the Spain-based NGO Grain. *“If left unchecked, this global land grab could spell the end of small-scale farming, and rural livelihoods, in numerous places around the world,”* said Grain. FAO’s Land Tenure and Management Unit, **Paul Mathieu**, acknowledged that the buying up of arable land *“is a phenomenon of huge magnitude”* which has undergone *“a sudden acceleration.”*¹

Huge tracts of arable land in some of the world’s poorest and hungriest countries are being privatized and consolidated by foreign companies. Often, they are declared special economic zones (SEZ) to produce cash crops or industrial goods for export to affluent countries. **The most scenic and pristine coastal, marine and mountain areas are taken over for tourism and real estate development catering to the rich foreign tourists.**

Walden Bello, from Bangkok-based NGO Focus on the Global South pointed out in an interview with AFP that many of the questionable land deals were struck in dysfunctional and corruption-ridden nations. **“What**

¹ ‘Global land grab’ causing alarm among NGOs, AFP, 23 Dec 2008.

we're talking about is private parties using state contracts to enrich themselves," he said. *"It's an intersection of corrupt governments and land-hungry nations."*

Climate Change Impacts Worsen Crisis

Meanwhile, climate change is likely to cause hunger catastrophes that may affect half of the world's population in the coming decades. This is the conclusion of a new study by **David Battisti**, a University of Washington atmospheric sciences professor, and **Rosamond Naylor**, director of Food Security and the Environment at California's Stanford University, which was published in the academic journal *Science* beginning of January. The researchers analyzed data from 23 global climate models produced for the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's* (IPCC) 2007 scientific analysis. Their results showed that there is a 90 % chance that most of the tropics and sub-tropics—exactly the regions where the poorest people already live—will experience unprecedented seasonal average temperatures by the end of the twenty-first century. *"The stresses on global food production from temperature alone are going to be huge, and that doesn't take into account water supplies stressed by the higher temperatures,"* said Battisti.²

As many countries in the South are already experiencing the impacts of climate change—in the form of more frequent and severe droughts and floods, for example—*governments should no longer give approval or even subsidize the construction of luxurious hotels, villas and golf courses. Such projects are not only devouring much-needed agricultural lands but also put additional stress on natural resources that in these times of warming climate must be preserved in order to sustain the lives and livelihoods of their population.*

Free Trade Agreements Magnify Hunger and Poverty Problems

Unfortunately, economic liberalization has worked in favour of misguided development projects at the cost of the poor. Globalization critics recently warned that ASEAN's free trade agreements aimed to bring about greater economic integration by lowering intra-regional trade barriers, may lead to severe susceptibilities to food-price turbulence. **Aekapol Chongvilaivan**, a Thai research fellow at the Singapore-based *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, recently said: *"The recurring food turmoil*

² *Temperature rises threaten global food security*, Nature magazine, 8 Jan 2009

provides a key lesson: the rush to pave the way toward zero tariffs without a thorough understanding of its impact is enormously perilous.” He raised the example of the Philippines, where unceasing food shortages illustrate as to “how globalization as the basis of ASEAN’s economic linkages has turned a self-sufficient, rice-producing country into the world’s largest rice-importing one. With the drive toward a free trade area in Southeast Asia, cheaper rice from Thailand and Vietnam has crowded out resources allocated for rice production and ultimately made the Philippines highly dependent on rice imports. Undoubtedly, the increases in rice prices in mid-2008 propelled millions of the poor in the Philippines into malnutrition.”³

In response to the looming crisis, the Philippine government in April 2008 decided to temporarily halt the conversion of agricultural lands for property development and other uses amid concerns it needs to protect its paddy fields to meet a growing demand for rice. But it is doubtful whether the order to put on hold the development of farmland into resort and residential sites, golf courses and shopping malls are being properly enforced because it would effectively counter the government’s plans to turn the entire country into a tourism zone. To achieve this goal, the Philippine Senate passed in June 2008 the ***Tourism Act 2008***, which makes it even easier for transnational corporations to take over the land and to exploit people, culture and natural resources for tourism purposes.

The negative impacts of FTAs are also clearly felt in the Caribbean and Latin America. For instance, the EU signed a FTA with Mexico in 2000, which makes regulations on European companies illegal, such as requirements to work with local companies, employ local people or retain profits within the country. Subsequently, European transnational companies have taken over vast tracts of land for resort and real estate development and around 90 % of tourism services at the Maya Riviera on the Caribbean coast. Local residents complain that the European tourism companies, especially the Spanish hotel chains Riu Resorts, IberoStar, Melia, Oasis and Gala, have not only led to the degradation of the coastal environment but pushed many local businesses into bankruptcy as they have successfully created monopolies in the liberalized business environment.

³ *Asean free trade magnifies hunger problem*, Bangkok Post, 7 Jan. 2009

Dangerous Bubble

The *International Land Coalition*, a Rome-based NGO, has voiced concern that the globalization of land markets is provoking increased land speculation by multinational companies, including investment banks.⁴

Indeed, the tourism-related land boom is a classic example of a bubble and its dangers. In Dubai, for example, speculators just saw the property boom as a surefire earner. At the height of the real estate bonanza, mortgages were easy and property could be sold for profit even before construction was finished—a practice known as “flipping.” Substantial profits could be earned in a matter of days, sometimes even hours immediately after buying a property, business insiders say. Then the financial crisis began lapping on the beaches of Dubai’s many manmade islands that were meant to become tourist paradise. Rows of apartment blocks and exclusive villas have now lost their value, as banks have reined in lending, casting a pall over corporate finance and construction.⁵

As an Economist article about the current bubble economy said: “*The costs are clear: growing speculation as the bubble inflates, driving prices and value further and further apart; the sharks and the fraudsters, peddling fantasies to misguided investors; the gathering doubts about sustainability; and then the calamitous bursting of confidence, causing debts, defaults and despair.*”⁶

Fuelling Organized Crime

It has been common knowledge for many years that **big money from the global shadow economy (e.g. drug, arms smuggling, human trafficking) has significantly boosted the construction of mega-resorts**. In 1980s, Japanese anti-golf course campaigners warned that the yakuza, the Japanese mafia, was a significant factor behind the resort and golf course boom in the Asia Pacific region. And **Polly Pattulo** writes in her book ‘*Last Resorts—the cost of tourism in the Caribbean*’, “*Tourism coexists with organized crime in a kind of symbiotic relationship, and the US State Department reports also emphasize this link between tourism, money-laundering and offshore-banking.*” She further reports about **numerous**

⁴ Global trends driving ‘land grab’ in poor nations: activists, AFP, 4 Jan 2009

⁵ Iranians hit by Dubai property slide, Reuters, 17 Dec 2008; Price fog engulfs speculators, The National UAE, 16 Dec. 2008

⁶ ‘Booms and bust: the beauty of bubbles’, The Economist, 18 Dec. 2008

shady business deals on Caribbean islands, involving real estates, hotels or villas, casinos or catering firms as well as airlines, “*each one an intrinsic part of the tourist industry.*”

As in the Caribbean, the Southeast Asian tourism industry provides the perfect infrastructure in which organized crime can flourish. The daily network of planes, cruise ships and yachts makes it easy for smugglers and other criminals to operate. Resorts and real estates boasting marinas or landing strips for private planes make it particularly convenient to illegally transship people and goods across borders. As Phuket in southern Thailand has become known as a hub for traffickers, for example, Thai police last year imposed stricter controls on marinas in Phuket in order to curb the illegal trade.

In conclusion, it is time to demand an end to the global mega-resort and real estate boom. Land and natural resources should belong to all people in a country and must be preserved and used wisely to benefit local communities, particularly in these times of crises and uncertainties. Governments must not allow precious land and water areas to be parceled off and sold to foreign investors, speculators and agents of the shadow economy.

Golf Courses and Food Production in Thailand

By Anita Pleumarom, Tourism Investigation & Monitoring Team (tim-team)

Sport for all or food for all? The two may not be mutually exclusive ideals, but when it comes to golf, the world's hungry have good reasons to get angry.

At the United Nations-sponsored *World Food Summit* in Rome in October 1996, the Washington-based *World Watch Institute* for the first time raised the concern that the rapid proliferation of golf courses around the world considerably contributed to take food out of the poor people's mouths. World Watch researcher **Gary Gardner** presented a paper entitled "*Shrinking Fields*," which pointed out that if the thousands of hectares used for golf course construction had been planted in grain, it would have supported hundreds of thousands of people. At the same conference experts further warned that golf courses drained much needed water from agricultural use in many parts of the world. In Southeast Asia, it was argued, the courses required water at about the same time like crops in the dry season. So golf clubs and resorts directly competed with agriculture for water supplies that became increasingly scarce. ([See also World Watch](#)).

More than 10 years on, there are worrisome reports about worsening food shortage crises that have even led to food riots in several countries. Meanwhile, the frenzy to build new courses has continued particularly in the developing world. In a number of countries in Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America, golf courses—often in combination with hotels, holiday villas, condominiums, marinas, and entertainment facilities—are mushrooming mostly for the sake of tourism. Ironically, in the rich tourist-sending countries the interest in the golf sport is declining. According to a recent study conducted by the Florida-based *National Golf Foundation*, about 3 million golfers in the United States quit playing each year and several hundred of the 3 000 new golf courses built in the US between 1990 and 2003 have closed.⁷ Yet, the US remain the world's leading golfing nation with 16 000 courses, followed by Japan with more than 3 000 courses.

In order to draw attention to the problem of golf courses contributing to food insecurity in developing countries, the Bangkok-based *Tourism Investigation & Monitoring Team* (tim-team) in cooperation with

⁷ Bloomberg, 12 Nov. 2008

Biothai—a network of Thai civic groups concerned with biodiversity protection and sustainable agriculture—has made the following calculations on how much rice could be produced on the land currently used for golf courses in Thailand.

According to golf industry sources, there are presently some 250 golf courses in operation or soon to open in Thailand. Most of these were built during the Asian golf boom beginning of the 1990s and are 18-hole international standard golf courses. Considering that, according to US standards, 150 to 200 acres are needed for a 18-hole golf course, Thailand's 250 golf courses consume 37 500 to 50 000 acres of the country's land area. For our calculations, we have used the average of 43 500 acres which equals 110 000 rai (the commonly used square measure in Thailand). This is a minimum figure, however. In fact, one golf course complex in Thailand including resort and residential developments can cover 5 000 acres and more!

It is also worth noting that the majority of Thai golf courses are located in the agriculturally most productive areas. More precisely, 65 to 75 % of the courses were built on farmland, while 13.5 to 26 % were constructed on forest land, according to a 1991 study by **Pornchai Termwaree**. Data provided by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment show that more than half of the projects—namely 138 courses—are located in the Central Region, which is traditionally Thailand's rice bowl due to its highly fertile soils.

Rice yields greatly vary in Thailand, from minimum yields of less than 300 kg per rai in traditional farming (i.e. rain-fed, little or no chemical input) to maximum yields of up to 1 000 kg per rai in intensive farming (that relies on artificial irrigation and considerable chemical input). We also have to consider that in some parts of Thailand, three crops are being produced in one year.

To keep our calculation as simple as possible, we have used the information provided by the Agricultural Ministry that in 2007, a Thai rice farmer on average produced 450 kg of paddy (unpolished rice) per rai. But the amount of polished rice is only 60 % of the paddy, that means 240 kg per rai ready for consumption.

On the total golf course area of 110 000 rai, farmers could produce 29.7 million kg polished rice. In other words, a yield of 29.7 million kg (29 700 ton) rice could be achieved as food supply on the 43 500 acres

used up by the 250 Thai golf courses. Accordingly, if three crops can be made in one year, the amount of rice for consumption would be 89.1 million kg (89 100 ton).

Out of the 32 million tons of polished rice produced in Thailand in 2007, some 9 to 10 million tons were exported at an average price of 11,474 Baht (US\$327.82; US\$1=35 Baht), according to the government's Department of Foreign Trade. So we can also estimate as to how much income could be achieved through the export of the rice produced on the total golf course area. If one ton of rice for export fetches 11,474 Baht (US\$327.82), the income from one crop—29 700 ton—produced on the 43 500 acres presently used as golf courses would be 340.77 million Baht or US\$9.73 million. If we calculate three crops a year, 1.02 billion Baht (US\$29.2 million) could be made annually.

It would also be possible to present figures on the net profit made from the respective amount of rice for export. But this would involve more complicated calculations because the production costs depend on many variables (e.g. the costs for seeds or seedlings, field preparation, irrigation, fertilizer, chemicals, labour and transport).

Of course, the above figures are only rough estimates. But they help to strengthen the argument that the proliferation of golf courses affects the natural resource base on which agriculture depends, with significant consequences for food security. Thailand is still fortunate that it can produce enough food for its population and for export. Moreover, the golf course density is still relatively low. The Asian financial crisis that began in Thailand in 1997 turned out as a blessing in disguise as it effectively thwarted golf promoters' plans to build more than 1 000 courses in the country. As a result of the economic downturn, many projects went bankrupt and few new projects have been realized in Thailand. Therefore, we can assume that in other regions, the impacts of golf course construction on food production are much more severe.

We would like to encourage concerned citizens and groups in other parts of the world to present similar calculations on golf courses and food production in their countries so we get a more complete picture of the losses due to golf courses. As a reminder, the golf industry is here to cater to the world's richest people only, while contributing little or nothing to the welfare of the poor. The current global financial crisis that is hitting hard both the golf and tourism business also clearly demonstrates as to how unsustainable and wasteful golf courses are. *"Meltdown leaves ghost re-*

sorts” was the headline of a recent Associated Press story about empty luxury mega-golf resorts in the Caribbean affected by the economic tsunami.⁸

We need to keep alive the *Global Anti-Golf Movement*’s (GAG’M) campaign that says NO to irresponsible development projects such as golf courses and promotes food security and sustainable livelihoods as primary goals.

Note: [Bangkok-based tim-team](#) is one of the coordinating groups of the *Global Anti-Golf Movement* (GAG’M), an alliance of citizens and non-governmental organizations that was formed in 1993 in Penang, Malaysia, as a response to the worldwide outcry of thousands of communities harmed by environmentally and socially damaging golf course projects.

⁸ AP, 19 Nov. 2008 [see #4]



WorldWatch: Matters of Scale—Planet Golf

Number of photos in the January/February issue of Coastal Living that showed coastal wildlife (seabirds, crustaceans, turtles, or other fauna):

*** 1 ***

Number of photos in the same issue showing golf courses:

*** 61 ***

Amount of water it would take, per day, to support 4.7 billion people at the UN daily minimum:

*** 2.5 billion gallons ***

Amount of water used, per day, to irrigate the world's golf courses:

*** 2.5 billion gallons ***

Number of golf courses in Japan before World War II

*** 23 ***

Number in operation or soon to open in 2004:

*** 3 030 ***

Average amount of pesticides used per acre, per year, on golf courses:

*** 18.0 pounds ***

Average amount of pesticides used, per acre, per year, in agriculture:

*** 2.7 pounds ***

Amount of water used by 60 000 villagers in Thailand, on average/day:

*** 6 500 cubic meters ***

Amount of water used by one golf course in Thailand, on average/day:

*** 6 500 cubic meters ***

Current area of the wetlands of the Colorado River Delta, which now receives just 0.1 percent of the river water that once flowed through it:

*** 150 000 acres ***

Area that could be covered to a depth of 2 feet with water drawn from the Colorado River by the city of Las Vegas, which uses much of that allotment to water its more than 60 golf courses:

*** 150 000 acres ***

Sources:

Photos: *Coastal Living*, January/February 2004;

Water usage: **Chris Reuther**, *Know Your Environment*, Academy of Natural Sciences, 1999;

National Golf Foundation;

State of the World 2004;

Japan: “*Japan Golf courses and Deforestation*,” TED Case #282, 2003;

Pesticides: “*EcoMall: A Greener Golf Course*, 2004;”

Thailand: U.K. Sports Turf Research Institute;

Colorado River: *Environmental Defense*; Las Vegas: Associated Press.