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Meet the Man With a Plan to Build Greener Golf Communities

Hunter Meldman, the first sustainability director for the real estate firm Discovery Land Company, talks about the new focus on environmental preservation.



At Silo Ridge Field Club in the Hudson Valley, the Discovery Land Company has 530 acres set aside for conservation. Via Silo Ridge Field Club

By *Shivani Vora* - Sept. 9, 2022

Some golf communities dabble in sustainability. For Discovery Land Company, a real estate business based in Scottsdale, Ariz., with more than 30 private residential developments globally, it's more than that. That is, according to Hunter Meldman, the company's first sustainability director. "Sustainability has never been more important to us and to our homeowners, and we're focusing more and more on living as environmentally friendly as possible," he said.

The company's green living initiatives include harnessing renewable energy, minimizing the use of plastics, recycling wastewater, composting, and setting aside land for conservation.

Discovery Land Company's recent attention to environmental preservation is part of a larger movement in golf real estate, according to Christine Kane, the chief executive of Audubon International, a nonprofit that evaluates and certifies golf communities and golf courses for their eco-friendliness through its Cooperative Sanctuary Program. "The interest in owning a green golf property and living in a golf community where sustainability is on top of mind is at an all-time high," she said.

This year, 1,000 golf courses in 29 countries, many of which have a residential component, are fully certified by Audubon International, a rise from 617 in 13 countries in 2010.

And searches on [sothebysrealty.com](https://www.sothebysrealty.com) for eco-friendly golf properties increased by nearly 20 percent from January through July this year, compared with the same period in 2021.

For his part, Mr. Meldman, 35, said that he first became interested in sustainability while growing up in San Francisco, where he frequently embarked on hiking and camping trips with his brother, Will, and father, Mike — who founded Discovery Land Company in 1994. “As I became more immersed in nature, I realized how important it was to keep our land as unspoiled as possible,” he said.

He studied sustainability at the University of Colorado and graduated from the Masters of the Environment program.

The following conversation has been edited and condensed.



Hunter Meldman, above, at Silo Ridge, grew up camping and hiking. “As I became more immersed in nature,” he explained, “I realized how important it was to keep our land as unspoiled as possible.” Via Silo Ridge Field Club

Discovery Land Company has been around for more than 25 years. Why appoint a director of sustainability now?

Our focus is recent because the field is recent. We have many more opportunities to implement new systems and technologies that weren't around when we started.

Although I am the director of sustainability, we have amazing teams on each property who take charge of certain initiatives. The general managers are a big help, as are the sales staff, project architects, project engineers and even our members. A lot of people are contributing.

Can you explain your big-picture approach to going green?

Our ethos is geared toward integration with nature, preserving open space and having a minimal impact on the site itself. We believe in low-density communities, and when we have larger properties, we place part of the land in a conservation easement, which means that it can never be developed. At Silo Ridge in the Hudson Valley, for example, we have an easement on 530 acres, which is 65 percent of the property.

We also restore natural habitats and plant native vegetation. At Zapotal in Costa Rica, which is currently under construction, we are going to plant endangered species of trees — about 12,000 in all.

Golf is a game that is often perceived as being the opposite of green. How can the courses themselves be greener?

At Discovery, we build environmentally sensitive courses that limit the amount of manicured turf and water consumption. We also preserve the protected land around the courses. In coastal areas, we use paspalum grass, which thrives on brackish/saltier water, and also use retention liners to capture rainwater and irrigation that we reuse.

Our sustainability approach to our courses also varies depending on the destination. At Driftwood Golf and Ranch Club outside Austin, Texas, we designed the Fazio golf course to utilize treated wastewater for irrigation, thereby ultimately eliminating any need for municipal water use.

How does sustainability figure into the planning stages?

You first must comply with local regulations. Depending on the area, some regulations are focused on the coastal environment, some places prioritize storm water drainage and others, site disturbance mitigation. We want the homes to look like they were dropped in, rather than forced in.

Discovery is also introducing alternative energy to its communities. Can you explain how?

Different areas of the world source their energy from different sources, and we analyze the region, soils and weather as we strategize our energy plan.

For instance, the majority of Costa Rica is already hydro-powered, so we won't need solar panels, despite it being sunny year-round. At Troubadour [Golf & Field Club] near Nashville, the site is a wonderful location for geothermal heating and cooling, so we are pursuing that.

Overall though, most of our communities have the ability to pursue electric-powered transportation. Transportation on-site is almost all by golf cart, which can be charged on solar. We also provide shuttles and are looking to get a fleet of electric vans. And, we're suggesting solar power in our design guidelines for custom homes.

How is Discovery minimizing its use of plastics?

We've pretty much done away with all plastics. Water bottles and straws were our biggest culprits. Now, we use straws made from agave that biodegrade. We also give all homeowners reusable water bottles and have installed water-refill stations throughout the communities. In the instances that we need to offer water in single-use bottles, we're working with a company called Zen. All the bottles are made from recycled oceanbound plastic.

Food is a big way in which Discovery tries to be sustainable. Can you explain how?

Many of our communities have gardens and farms, and we try to rely on them as much as possible to source the ingredients for our restaurants.

In the instances where we can't source the ingredients on-site, our chefs look to local farms.

And many of our farms, such as the one at Driftwood, use harvested rainwater from the residential homes in the area, along with an irrigation program, to water the crops. In addition, some of our food waste gets composted and reused as fertilizer.

Is it more expensive to be greener?

Initially, yes, but in the long term, no. Over a long time period, you can save money. For instance, a seasonal home can produce more power than it uses. With the right solar install and battery backup, it can store energy to use during peak hours and then import power during nonpeak hours, if necessary. When that energy isn't being used, you can sell it back to the grid (depending on local regulations) and offset installation costs.