Students learn their trade on Askernish

South Uist course is the ideal classroom

The Hebridean island of South Uist may seem like an unlikely place for aspiring greenkeepers to learn their trade but since 2009 it has been the venue for an R&A-supported programme that brings six of the best students in the country together to learn sustainable design, greenkeeping, management and biodiversity.

The island’s Askernish course has received international acclaim for its restoration after being lost for more than 70 years. It was rediscovered by Gordon Irvine, Master Greenkeeper, and, with help from industry professionals, he managed to restore the original Old Tom Morris design to showcase how the course might have played 100 years ago.

In 2009, Askernish hosted a pilot project commissioned by the R&A that saw scholarship-awarded students visit the Askernish Machair to experience a week of lectures, seminars, and workshops on the true meaning of sustainability by some of the industry’s leading experts in agronomy, ecology, design and greenkeeping.

SUSTAINABLE

The success of that first trip has resulted in the creation of Student Sustainability Project, a bi-annual visit to South Uist that epitomises the R&A’s dedication to encouraging sustainable development and management of golf courses.

During Ryder Cup week, two students from Elmwood College and four of their contemporaries from Myerscough College, Preston, travelled to the Outer Hebrides. Irvine, architect Martin Ebert, ecologist Dr Keith Duff and sportsturf agronomist Dr Andy Owen joined the group to provide insight into sustainable course management.

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Commenting on the programme, Irvine said: “The students gain the experience of the origins of greenkeeping on this trip. It gives them the opportunity to see nature’s influence on golf courses first-hand on a golf course that has never been artificially altered.”

Among the many lessons learned by the students during the week, one of the most important is that when maintaining a golf course, less is more and allowing the golf course to work in harmony with nature can cut costs and deliver fantastic results.

Dr Owen said: “The week gives the students practical industry experience from experts in their fields, on a naturally maintained and restored golf course that puts classroom learning into practice and gets put to the test.”

Among them, the students have already worked at some high-profile golf courses around the world, including those in Norway, the United States and Belgium, and hope being selected for the Student Sustainability Week will be integral to their goal of continuing to step up the greenkeeping ladder.

In March 2013, Askernish Golf Club will welcome Golf Management students from the University of the Highlands and Islands for a similar week of activities also part-funded by the R&A.

This, in part, helps to illustrate the importance the golf industry’s educational institutions are placing on issues of sustainability and gives a great insight into what golf course and facility management will entail in the years to come.