



Sustainability and Legacy: How Olympic golf will embrace Rio



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The challenges facing Rio2016 when deliberating on golf's imminent return to the Olympic Games were, to say the least, quite considerable.

For a start, Rio de Janeiro did not possess a modern, 21st century golf course, which would be considered fit to house the Olympic golf competitions. Nor did the municipality have an obvious site on which to build a course worthy of the world's greatest sporting event.

Undeterred, the City of Rio identified a potential site and put the design process out to tender, attracting many of the biggest golf architects in the business. Now, the complex at Reserva de Marapendi – once 70% degraded during the 1980s and 1990s – is a flourishing, gleaming golf facility which will provide Rio, and Brazil, with a lasting legacy beyond the Olympic Games.

"We are very proud of the fact that, once the athletes leave, Rio will have a sustainable, environmentally protected piece of land which will play an important social and sporting role in the years ahead," said Tania Braga, Head of Rio2016 Sustainability.

Reserva de Marapendi will host the two Olympic competitions in consecutive weeks – the men from August 11-14 and the women from August 17-20 – and Braga believes that the world's best players will be impressed by the construction of a course which offers a sporting challenge against a backdrop of spectacular nature and wildlife.

The location of the golf course is in an area designated by law as an Environment Protection Area (APA). An expert appointed by the Court of Justice carried out an inspection of the site in December 2015 and concluded that the Olympic Golf Course has brought environmental benefits to the land where it was implemented and to the surrounding Marapendi Environmental Protected Areas, by significantly increasing the area covered by native vegetation, recuperating an area that had been degraded since the 1980s.



The setting, says Braga, will show off Rio's biodiversity while maintaining its Environmentally Protected status and offering a campus for aspiring golfers, young and old, male and female, to enjoy and be educated on the sport in the future.

Although located in a protected area, approximately 70% of the site was degraded before the implementation of the golf course, which was constructed by American Gil Hanse following a public contest to source the winning design. The remaining 30% included the preservation of natural vegetation, with a mixture of native, exotic and invasive species.

The environment license was approved on condition that measures would be taken to minimise risks to species and habitat. In particular, the developers changed the golf course design to greatly reduce the need for native vegetation transplantation. The final design addressed the environmental sustainability directive for the Games and efficiently blended into the building restrictions on the land, integrating native vegetation to the design.

Braga explained: "It was a balancing act for Gil Hanse to create a golf course which would be exciting and thrilling for the golfers and spectators, while at the same time leaving as much space as possible for the restoration side of the project."

"Yes, there was some negativity from local organisations, who criticised the golf course even though it was on degraded land. But the success of the process was amazing, with the careful transplantation of trees and plants. We had a 90% success rate with that side of things. The result is a net creation of 44 hectares of new native vegetation, which is quite considerable."

"Rio did a lot of innovative work on the mangroves, coastal woodland and fauna management. All the time, there were biologists working on preservation and relocating animals when necessary to make sure they were not disturbed by the construction work. It was a very interesting journey!"

There have been more than 100 species of birds recorded on the site, including many interesting species of butterflies. Some are regarded as critically endangered or vulnerable while there are many examples on the complex of mammals such as the South American endemic *capybara* and also the broad-snouted *caiman*, *paca* and several types of frog, owl, hawk, snake and lizard.

With nature and animal life now prevalent once again on the once-degraded site, the challenge for Rio2016 Sustainability is to ensure that wildlife preservation – there are over 263 species recorded – can be carried out in harmony with human activities.

Braga added: "We conduct periodic censuses, and there are many species which have come back, or new species which have taken up residence. Many have been very quick in finding their way back to the site."

The next steps for Rio2016 are to hand over the site to the Brazilian Golf Confederation (CBG) after the Olympic golfers have departed. Braga continued: "The site will be the direct responsibility of the CBG after the Games. They will be site managers, as well as the City of Rio. Primarily, it will be up to the CBG to take responsibility for the management and full-time operation of the course."

"The entire programme has been very important and is of high value to the Region. It has contributed to the environment and to sport. It will have a large social and sporting impact in future. Rio felt it was important to have a public golf course where people can pay and play and they don't have to be part of an exclusive club."

"This can contribute to making the sport more widely known and to get more people to play in Rio. It's important for the legacy that people can play at no great cost. There are also the schools and other educational programmes which will bring kids to learn about golf and try the sport. The CBG has already begun a partnership to get kids to know the sport in the area."



The 'green' policy also extends to the irrigation of the course. Braga added: "The golf course has been designed so that it accumulates the rain water in the small lagoons, and this is used for irrigation. The water is recycled naturally with no requirement for other sources of water."

During the Olympic Games, R02016 sustainability team will be conducting tours of the site to help educate the media, spectators and volunteers to understand the environmental issues. She concluded: "We are guests in the natural habitat of the wildlife and need to be careful where we step, to protect the vegetation and the animals. Everyone has a responsibility for their own actions, and we want to get the message across loud and clear."

Two Gold Medals will be won at Reserva de Marapendi in August. Maybe a third should be struck to honour Rio2016's efforts at converting a degraded site into a wonderful setting for golf – and an even more thrilling habitat for Brazil's natural world.

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