



DEGRADATIVE IMPACTS OF ELITE LANDSCAPES: RESIDENTIAL LAWNS AND GOLF COURSES

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Abstract: Environmental catastrophes, perpetuated by the unsustainable and unrestricted consumption of resources, are becoming increasingly apparent. Although elite practices often account for a disproportionate amount of resource usage, wealthy ways of life remain unchallenged while the non-elite continuously adapt to ecological crises. The cases of celebrity lawn-watering and golf course maintenance in drought-prone California represent the larger issue of elite practices that effectively oppose healthy change. These elite landscapes have become thoroughly ingrained in American culture, and dismantling their constructed necessity requires scepticism of information produced by those within dominant social orders. This paper will highlight the negative impacts of elite ecological practices while asserting that new ways of living, such as wild gardening and the repurposing of golf course land, should be embraced and empowered. Unnatural landscape aesthetics must be devalued to adapt to environmental changes, and to accomplish this feat, a cultural shift is crucial.

Keywords: water conservation, lawn care, golf course management, climate change, elites.

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INTRODUCTION

Between 2020-22, California fell into a period of severe drought, surpassing 2013-2015 as the state's driest period since the late 1800s (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom 2021). As non-drought-resistant flora dried up and temperatures became oppressive, a state of emergency was issued by Governor Gavin Newsom who urged Californians to voluntarily cut water use by 15%. Newsom promoted individual water conservation tips for concerned citizens which included filling bathtubs halfway and reducing the length of showers to five minutes (Save Our Water n.d.). With drought conditions stretching into 2023, California's Director of the Department of Water Resources (DWR 2022) stated, "this is our new climate reality, and we must adapt. As California transitions to a hotter, drier future, our extreme swings from wet and dry conditions will continue".

Amid this state of emergency, as Californians allowed lawns to wither and turn brown, the greenery that still ornamented the land of elite individuals – watered by sprinkler systems and landscaping laborers – became increasingly apparent. According to Los Angeles Times journalists Hayley Smith and Sean Greene (2022), celebrities Kim Kardashian, Kevin Hart, and Sylvester Stallone were among a few who, since the drought emergency was issued, exceeded "150% of their monthly water budgets at least four times". A large portion of this consumption was contributed to lawn care with Stallone's lawyer stating that Stallone, who used 230,000 excess gallons of water, was watering his hundreds of trees including fruit and pine trees. In the words of Stallone's lawyer, without landscape watering, the result would inevitably be "dead or damaged trees falling on my client's property or neighboring properties" (Smith, Greene 2022).

Similarly, during the 2013-2015 Californian drought, celebrities such as Kim and Khloe Kardashian, Kylie Jenner, Dr. Dre, and various others were caught using sprinkler systems or other forms of lawn watering to keep their yards noticeably green (see Capatides 2015). When viewing excessive water use documented from both droughts side-by-side, celebrity claims that they will engage in drought-conscious practices in the future, such as Kim Kardashian's publicist stating in 2015 that



Kim “has no problem letting her grass go brown” (Massarella 2015), generally seem to be words without action. The Californian drought case thus brings to light disparities in water and land use practices between elite groups who continue excessive-use routines and the masses who are expected to carry the weight of environmental conservation efforts. Such elite routines include the problematic ascription of value to aesthetics and excessive-use activities.

In light of the case of the drought in California, the following sections will provide an analysis of elite waste across the Californian landscape to emphasise that not enough is being done to counteract the environmental impacts of practices relying on excessive resource use. When criticisms against the upper-class are avoided, the masses are expected to counteract the effects of wealthy, environmentally-degradative practices through individual habit changes. Leaders call on citizens to take shorter showers while the impacts of elite use are not effectively challenged. Attempts to maintain the constructed importance of wealthy aesthetics and activity – visible in the defense of residential lawn care as well as golf courses – have taken priority over water conservation and the replenishment of natural flora. The unwillingness to sacrifice green manicured lawns, including the expansive golf course land that occupies large portions of the Californian expanse (Golf Channel Digital 2010), represents the larger problem of how hegemonic thought that is rooted in elitism rationalises inequality and “sees solutions only in a continuation of the same systems that generated the problems in the first place” (Lockyer, Veteto 2013: 1). Excessive elite usage of land and water is not something that should be viewed as the inevitable reality of pre-existing systems of wealth and power, especially since working-class individuals are left to lessen the effects of climate change, water shortages, and overall environmental degradation.

What forces allow excessive and problematic elite usage to perpetuate? How can this problem be confronted? To answer these topical questions, it is crucial to highlight data that effectively problematises the obsessive, aesthetically-centered, wealth-driven focus on residential lawn care and golf course maintenance. By providing facts with theoretical foundations, we as crit-



ics of the inequalities found in expected environmental obligations can more effectively put spotlights on data and dismantle the social orders that enable elites to maintain wasteful, non-essential habits. Wasteful habits of course extend beyond the examples of lawns and golf, but by narrowing the focus of this paper, tackling the problem of unrestrained elite use may feel more doable, especially as systems that benefit wealthy individuals consistently battle against disruptions to lavish lifestyles.

First, the concepts of “elite” and “elite landscape” will be explained in order to foster a more understandable discussion of elite waste. In highlighting classist foundations of elite landscapes that pay little mind to ecological harm, it becomes easier to view such landscapes through a critical, combative lens. Then, by utilizing the case studies concerning residential lawns and golf courses, this paper will provide an analysis of the ways in which these elite landscapes negatively impact the environment while maintaining social value. Finally, by providing potential solutions to elite environmental waste and degradation – such as placing an emphasis on pre-existing environmental movements, enacting income-based fines, and repurposing golf course land – this paper can give us the language to pressure legislators while allowing us to envision a more hopeful, less wasteful future.

FORMING THE ELITE LANDSCAPE

Elite

Throughout this paper, elitehood is thought of as an amalgamation of the “power elite”, as termed by C. Wright Mills ([1956] 2000), and the “new elite” of celebrities empowered by the increasing capacities of media technologies (Grinin 2011). In regards to the power elite, Mills writes that as economic, political, and military institutions become increasingly centralised, they are dominated by this minority of actors with enhanced directorial powers. In other words, the power elite “are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society” ([1956] 2000: 4). However, this idea of elite power can be expanded on to more thoroughly incorporate the stratum of the celebrity and its increasingly prevalent role in media-centric



life as was done by Leonid E. Grinin (2011) in *Celebrities as a New Elite of Information Society*. Grinin writes that celebrities, as a new elite, influence the structures of society by forming social groups of fans and popularizing certain lifestyles and behaviors. Additionally, due to the globalizing powers of technological infrastructures, the celebrity pop-culture influence is able to transcend national borders.

Thus, the echelons of elitehood are complex, encompassing various levels of influence and prestige that interact and overlap. Corporate elite may ally with or even become celebrity elite just as celebrity and political elite can unite in order to possess different forms of power (i.e. the powers of mass media and policymaking) as they seek to “make their names notable, their actions acceptable, their policies popular” (Mills [1956] 2000: 83). Despite the complexities surrounding the term “elite”, the common thread tying elitehood together is perhaps the observable inequalities that it produces – that is, the existence of elites sheds light on disproportionate concentrations of wealth, power, and privileges.

Landscape

To dismantle the elite landscape, it must first be viewed as a cultural construction rather than as a necessity. Geographer Carl O. Sauer ([1925] 1969) discussed his idea of cultural landscapes in the essay *The Morphology of the Landscape*, explaining that human-occupied land becomes the product of societal actions and transformations. To Sauer, the appearance of land is reflective of what is “significant to man” in regards to resource usage ([1925] 1969: 325). In his book *Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories*, Jonathan Padwe (2020: 12) highlights recent discussions surrounding Sauer’s ideological framework, including the idea that that different “culture groups” craft unique, “human-mediated environments” that are representative of histories and methods of identity formation. Expanding into Marxist theory, additional scholarship asserts that dominant culture groups possess disproportionate power over shaping landscapes. When explaining such arguments Padwe states:



Landscapes... are cultural productions, but it is the relationship of cultural expression to dominant forms of social relations that is a key determinant of what landscapes are made to mean. This relationship, furthermore, is not limited to the unidirectional imposition of meaning on the land. By representing a set of social relations as natural, as existing in the natural world, landscapes perform ideological work too, much in the same way that the commodity form does ideological work by erasing the relations of production that go into its making (2020: 12-13).

In viewing elites as a culture group who legitimise and reproduce one another's practices from within dominant social orders, we can see that they hold the power to frame landscapes – both physically and narratively – in accordance with what benefits their economic and social power. Manicured lawns are naturalised and become indicative of sophistication, order, and an achievement of the American Dream while the foundational classism is hidden from view. Take, for example, the American importation of English aristocratic landscaping. George Washington's Mount Vernon landscaper was one of many who followed English design, maintaining trimmed grass and open swaths of green land that became influential within wealthy American homeowner circles (Jenkins 1994). Clear-cut, manicured landscaping was empowered by other economically and socially powerful state leaders, the framework of "lawnmaking" produced by colonization (see Mastnak et al. 2014), and the desire to eliminate instances of "adjacency and mixture" (Groth 1994: 299), i.e. black/white and rich/poor. Soon enough, the idea that suburban homeownership and lawns "on which your children can play" were possessions to strive for had spread across the American expanse (Jenkins 1994: 21). Seeing that existing elites were more likely to achieve the land-owning dream, perpetuating this narrative that naturalised lawns were American awarded them more social power and made oppositional narratives more difficult to uphold.

Dominant social orders also include lawn industries that work to preserve lawns as images of sophistication and achievement in an attempt to render the ecologically problematic nature invisible. Within the United States, lawn care – encompassing the maintenance of both residential lawns and golf course land – has



become a multi-billion-dollar industry (Jenkins 1994), advertising pesticides, mowing equipment, fertilizers, grass seeds, and more tools purposed with creating clean-cut stretches of green grass free of weeds and pests. Backed by the wealth and power of corporate elites, lawns are able to be further framed as a natural part of American life.

In light of concerns regarding the invasion of extensive, manicured, heavily-watered lawns in Southwestern states, literature that accepts the natural presence of these landscapes sees lawn care as in need of development rather than as a landscaping practice that must be altered entirely. For example, Mechsny et al. (2017: 1537) blame the downfalls of lawns on “improper lawn maintenance practices” and propose the production of lawn-watering robots that are able to measure the level of moisture in the soil. Such expensive innovations are not likely facilitate meaningful structural change and would certainly be more accessible to wealthy individuals in celebrity hotspots like California’s Hidden Hills who are eager to maintain the aesthetic value of their properties.

Other literature has sought to assert the positive benefits of existing lawn care systems. For one, the book *Golf Course Management, Construction: Environmental Issues* (1992), which includes contributors in partnership with the United States Golf Association as well as many who conduct their research in California, proposes a defense of extensive golf course turfgrass. Here, Balogh et al. list the benefits of golf course land, including “recreational and aesthetic benefits” as well as “dust control, cooling effects, noise abatement, and enhancement of real estate value” (Balogh et al. 1992: 2). Wealthy aesthetics along with the potential to draw economic and social capital from golf course land are seen as viable defenses that work to “balance the potential adverse effects of turfgrass management in relation to public health concerns, effects on nontarget organisms, potential degradation of water resources, and effects on wetlands” (Balogh et al. 1992: 2). Recent digital publications have also emphasised this narrative, with Turf Distributors (n.d.), which maintains a hub in California, stating that although lawns in drought-prone areas have the negative impacts, “green lawns



are central to American identity. They are a symbol of prosperity, responsibility, and civic virtue”. What is missing in these proclamations is that, as excessive water usage fines are implemented in California (Borba 2022), maintaining such landscapes in the midst of droughts is increasingly indicative of wealth rather than of “responsibility”.

With these bodies of literature in mind, I wish to highlight that it is in the midst of environmental (and economic) crises when those of lower socioeconomic classes have access to water and land restricted that the construction of the elite landscape becomes widely realised. In this crucial moment of climate change, literature that is oriented in frameworks of sustaining or further developing elite landscapes fails to recognise the problematic nature of residential lawn and golf course care. Now is the time for not only dismantling the perceived importance of such landscapes but also for proposing solutions for dealing with issues of elite excessive use.

MAKING EXCESSIVE USE VISIBLE

Residential lawns

As the previous section exhibits, expanses of clean-cut, frequently-watered greenery began in elite circles, and efforts to establish the elite landscape as a natural facet of American life have since been backed by dominant social orders including influential elites, lawn care industries, and economically-focused developmental literature. These conjoining efforts to uphold the elite landscape as middle class fantasies that should be reproduced nationwide have worked to hide that such landscapes are nothing but classist, aesthetically-centered constructions. However, the presence of crisis, such as California’s recent droughts, enables the elite-oriented nature of obsessively manicured landscapes to become widely realised. Important statistics about upper-class usage in the midst of the California drought have been made public, and they are one such resource that put a spotlight on the disparities of water usage, indicating that not enough is being done to hamper the ecological impact of the upper-class.

First, though, what are the ecological impacts of lawns? In a NASA study, Milesi et al. (2005) note that in Western states like California where evaporation rates are higher, people who watered lawns according to environmental conditions would need to use nearly 200 centimeters of water per year. When taking into account to the lawn surface area in the United States which covered an estimated 163.812 km² – including residential, commercial, and institutional lawns – at the time of Milesi’s study, 184-238 gallons of water per person per day would be required to ensure that every lawn is adequately watered (NASA 2005). That is a larger surface area than the entirety of Georgia, the 24th largest state, and covers three times more land than any irrigated crop. NASA (2005) expresses that this is important because lawn watering has an impact on dropping freshwater levels, as an estimated 30% of residential water use is devoted to outdoor maintenance (Vickers 2001, as cited in Bremer et al. 2015). Dropping freshwater levels leads to the drying of rivers and streams that are a vital component of ecosystem health, and this may also open the door for saltwater to flow into these once freshwater aquifers due to the speed and intensity of human consumption.

Additionally, following heavy lawn watering or a period of rain showers, lawn chemicals in pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizer collecting in runoff impacts the health of a wide range of species. There is the possibility of drinking water becoming contaminated (Carey et al. 2013) and lawn care chemicals can also lead to the increased presence of algae that block underwater grasses from receiving sunlight, an occurrence that is detrimental to aquatic life such as the plankton that feed fish and shellfish (Tekle 2011: 216). Aquatic ecosystems are put at risk along with those most susceptible to the consumption of toxic chemicals in contaminated food and water (Gaffield et al. 2003).

Beyond water-based effects, frequent lawn mowing has been shown to harm pollinator habitats by eliminating pollen and nectar sources that have been deemed “weeds” (Lerman et al. 2018). Bumble bees are also negatively impacted by neonicotinoid pesticides used to keep lawns aesthetically-pleasing. Exposure to the pesticide delays bumble bee weight gain and leads to the failure to produce new queens (Larson et al. 2013). So,



although lawns have aesthetic value and some positive impacts (Milesi et al. explain that they act as carbon sequestering systems), the negative impacts of lawns in their current form – including high levels of water use; possible water contamination; and the diminished health of humans, aquatic life, and pollinators – seem to outweigh the benefits of working to sustain the current lawn care system.

With these ecological consequences in mind, the continued preservation of degradative lawn landscapes becomes much more jarring. Elite-fueled aesthetic values paired with a focus on economic development in lawn care industries have impeded attempt to shift practices that have destructive effects. Studies indicate higher income is significantly related to higher levels of residential water use (Arbués et al. 2003) and that those who own more expensive homes exhibit a higher likelihood of watering lawns frequently and on a routine schedule (Bremer et al. 2015; Mansur, Olmstead 2012). These studies hold up when applied specifically to California with Mini et al. (2014) showing that lower income Los Angeles neighborhoods use less water than wealthier counterparts. As an example, the lower income Venice neighborhood uses an estimated 307 m³ of water per single family residential (SFR) customer per year compared to the wealthier Pacific Palisades neighborhood using 827 m³/SFR customer/yr. This is a phenomenon that becomes much more obvious when viewing green, groomed, adequately-watered celebrity residential lawns that prospered in the midst of California droughts.

The direness of the water use situation is heightened with the presence of a Level 2a shortage in Lake Mead, the water supplier of an estimated 25 million people (Becker 2022). States dependent on the Colorado River basin have subsequently faced cuts to water supplies, but since it holds senior rights, California has not yet been impacted. With clear indications of massive looming freshwater shortages paired with threats to species health and water quality, how can the continued practice of extensive, aesthetically-centered lawn care be allowed to continue?

California has implemented some mildly effective policies purposed with slowing freshwater use. In 2022, the Santa Clara



Valley Water District approved fines between \$100 to \$10,000 that penalise excessive water users (Borba 2022). Among other cities, Los Angeles also implemented fines ranging from \$200-\$1,200 to punish those who violate the “Two-Days-A-Week” water conservation ordinance purposed with limiting outdoor watering (Los Angeles Dept. of Water and Power n.d.). However, wealthy individuals who use the most water are significantly less sensitive to finance-oriented changes (Ferraro, Price 2013). In the more affluent water district of Las Virgenes, spokesperson Mike McNutt stated that fines are unlikely to change the behaviors of wealthy residents, for they can easily be paid off (Beckett 2022).

Flow restrictors, which diminish residential water flows to a trickle, were introduced to address the lack of upper-class susceptibility to fines, and, as reporter Lois Beckett (2022) notes, the threat of flow restrictors possibly changed the habits of some elite individuals but not by a significant amount. Kim Kardashian’s lawn still maintained its green hue while Sylvester Stallone’s representative pushed back against the limitations. Additionally, Beckett writes, as far as the Santa Clara Valley Water District representatives knew, Las Virgenes was the only Californian water district that had implemented flow restrictors as of October 2022. They were also installed sparingly for a period of two weeks only after a residence had “exceeded its water limit by 150% at least four times since December 2021”.

These setbacks indicate that elite landscapes cannot be fully dismantled through fines and weak conservation initiatives. Wealth and social status hinder the effectiveness and the willingness of officials to enact punishments for excessive, irresponsible use. The elite-constructed importance of a lawn’s appearance means that aesthetics is more vital than adaption, social capital is more meaningful than environmental health, and the rich have fewer environmental obligations than the poor. As the following section detailing the protection of golf courses will show, a powerful cultural shift is required to fully heal from the elite brainwashing that seeks to maintain an unhealthy, yet socially beneficial, landscape stasis.



Golf courses

In the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's Earth Day news release, media relations manager Mike Strauss (2022) states:

Golf facilities in the U.S. provide significant green space, with more than 90 percent of its overall 2-million-acre footprint contributing to that green space. An average 18-hole golf course is 151 acres with just 15 acres of bunkers, buildings and parking lots. The rest consists of native areas, roughs, turfgrass, water features and other healthy landscapes.

Besides the mention of golf's astounding land coverage that has certainly contributed to deforestation, the destruction of natural habitats, the creation of erosion-prone land, and higher quantities runoff which can contain toxic chemicals (Winter et al. 2003; Wheeler, Nauright 2006), the phrase "healthy landscapes" stands out to critical readers. Here, the elite landscape is claimed to be indicative of environmental health, for it is green, well-watered, manicured, and perhaps includes the presence of some native species intermingled with the expanses of turfgrass. The environmental degradation is hidden behind picturesque views of lush grasses on which happy, sophisticated golfers play. Strauss, of course, does not mention the amount of freshwater that golf courses use to maintain a "healthy" appearance, with a single 18-hole course in southwestern desert states requiring an estimated 566 million liters of water annually (Throssell et al. 2009; retrieved from Scott et al. 2018).

California, according to the Golf Channel (2010), is one of "the most abundant golf states in America", and it housed a total of 940 courses covering 163.707 mi² as of 2010. In addition to the aforementioned negative environmental impacts, the construction of golf courses in California has been associated with the depleting population of the endangered peninsular bighorn sheep (Esposito 1998), and the courses draw water from the shrinking Colorado River basin (Wheeler, Nauright 2006). Present drought conditions also lead us to wonder if maintaining the appearances of California's hundreds of golf courses is an appropriate use of large quantities of precious



freshwater. Elite landscapes persist under the guise of healthy landscapes despite problematic impacts on habitats and the presence of environmental crises. To effectively highlight the extensive efforts that go into protecting golf course land I will now turn to a case that exhibits the influences of elite social orders: the fall of California Assembly Bill 672.

While California was still experiencing drought conditions in 2021, Cristina Garcia (D-Bell Gardens) introduced AB 672 to the legislative council with the heading “Publicly owned golf courses: conversion: affordable housing”. For the purpose of addressing the oppressive housing crisis, this bill sought to provide potential grants to local development agencies for converting publically-owned golf facilities – a label that 204 of California’s courses fall under (Klein 2022) – into housing and “publicly accessible open space” (A.B. 672 2022). Golfers throughout the state denounced this legislation as “The Public Golf Endangerment Act” and the “Anti-Public Golf Bill” (San Francisco Public Golf Alliance 2022). In an article on Golf.com, Josh Sens (2022) further condemned the bill as an assault from the political left who are “energised by the view of golf as an environmental bogeyman or an affront to equity or some combination of the two”. Additionally, Sens spends most of his article asserting that golf is not always a playground for the super-rich which, although true, erases the ways in which the elite landscape has been constructed as something for middle class individuals to strive for. All the while, golf courses have their importance asserted through elite-backed social orders as is clear from AB 672 wide-reaching negative media coverage.

Following lobbying from the Californian golf industry, golf associations, and other significant actors (Klein 2022), AB 672 died in the state assembly on January 31, 2022. The bill did not adequately address environmental concerns regarding water use and continuous alterations to species habitats, but its vehement condemnation exhibits the difficulties of dismantling the elite landscape. Such landscapes are viewed as healthy while environmental degradation is swept under the rug. Then, rather than drawing attention to their classist country club foundations with initiation fees averaging at \$7,500 (plus an additional \$300-\$700 in monthly fees) for a standard club and between



\$70,000-\$500,000 (with \$5,000-\$12,000 in monthly fees) for a luxury club membership (Daniel 2022), the elite landscape is painted as something that can be inclusive of and should be defended by the middle class. This way, there are useful stories about how repurposing golf courses would harm middle class peers who have found solace on land that would have once excluded them. Sympathetic stories circulate through golf's extensive connections to organizations, industries, and the media so the fall of AB 672 can be celebrated by all. The elite landscape subsequently carries on unscathed and effectively sustained all while the ecosystem continues to give its warnings that upper-class practices must change else crises become increasingly severe.

DISMANTLING ELITE LANDSCAPES

The issues presented by the elite landscape are not new and neither is the presence of actors combatting oppressive ecological transformations. In the 19th and 20th centuries, conservation movements emerged in California in response to the constant destructive intrusion of lawns (Mastnak et al. 2014: 369). Native American resistance to settler colonialism in California was also a fight against ecological conquest that disrupted indigenous agricultural systems, for “planting lawns helped transform conquered land into ‘native’ land for settlers”. The continued presence of such land thus represents the problematic, deeply-ingrained strength of elite social orders.

I previously stated that the United States requires an enormous cultural shift, one that would confront and deconstruct dominant landscape narratives that value aesthetics over environmental health. What is considered beautiful and healthy must become something place-based, taking into consideration specific environmental threats. In other words, different regions with varying climates, populations, water sources, flora, fauna, topographies, etc. face different challenges, and these regions cannot healthily be made uniform through the imposition of lawns. It is clear from the overwhelming presences of these elite landscapes nationwide that politicians and other powerful figures have not been doing enough to support attempts at



meaningful change in the midst of dire ecological crises. For one, influential actors could be shedding light on the “wild gardening” or “ungardening” (Kale 2019) movements that uplift “naturally occurring wild or semidomesticated” species considered unsightly or untamed by cultural perception (Eissler et al. 2021: 109). Encouraging such practices amidst narratives that have demoted wildflowers such as red maids (*Calandrinia ciliata*) to the status of “weeds” (Anderson 2005: 15) could benefit pollinators among other surrounding species. The increased presence of drought-resistant flora on Californian residential properties would also require less water than existing lawn landscapes.

In their article discussing strategies for lowering residential water usage, Ferraro and Price (2013) find that the non-pecuniary method of using social comparison to enhance the appeal of alternative living styles – in this case, more conservative water usage – had a significant positive impact on the highest water users (who were also least price sensitive). This indicates that constant reminders of alternative ways of living, such as embracing wild gardening, could influence elite individuals, rendering these adaptive landscapes normal or even trendy. However, Ferraro and Price find that the positive effects of non-pecuniary strategies eventually wane in wealthy groups. In light of this, the coexistence of normative strategies and income-based fines, similar to the Swedish day-fine system where the amount of a fine is dependent on one’s daily income (Öberg 2021), might be beneficial. That way, elites would be more dissuaded by fines than they are with California’s current system of pecuniary punishment.

The repurposing of excessive golf courses, like AB 672 sought to achieve, should also be essential. Golf courses around the world have been transformed into parks full of native trees, wildflower preserves, housing, sites of agriculture or reforestation, and solar farms (Peters 2019). However, such transformations should, again, be place-based and effectively take into account local needs as well as environmental threats. In drought-prone California, there should not be over 900 golf courses that each require large quantities of water, but the road to repurposing this land should be thoroughly planned and



continuously pushed for in political realms. Such initiatives should also not hone in on easy targets, such as the 13 Californian golf courses owned by Native American tribes (Visit California n.d.), which would perpetuate the pattern of conservation tactics disproportionately affecting those who have not historically been backed by dominant social orders (Dawson 2022). Each case should receive special treatment, recognizing that planning and publicity are key for facilitating overall norm alterations.

CONCLUSION

The elite landscape has been finely crafted, possessing such a strong foundation within dominant social orders that its perpetual existence is painted as a healthy necessity. As a culture group seeking to maintain social capital, elites legitimise and reproduce the image of lush, well-watered, green expanses of grass nationwide, even within drought-ridden land. Media outlets, lawn and golfing industries, golf associations, celebrities, and other influential actors work together to uphold these landscapes that contribute to the excessive use of water, vast transformations of land, and resulting environmental degradation. However, in the midst of environmental crises and increased wealth disparities, the construction of the elite landscape is able to become more widely-realised and critiqued. This essay thus highlighted two examples of elite landscapes – residential lawns and golf courses – in which excessive and problematic land and water use is becoming increasingly recognised as droughts in California persist.

The overabundance of residential lawns contributes to problematic water usage, especially in Southwestern desert states, as well as chemicals in runoff that negatively impact aquatic life and the quality of drinking water. In addition, pollinators suffer within lawn landscapes where pollen and nectar sources, after being deemed weeds, are mowed away. The reliance on pesticides to keep lawns looking aesthetically-pleasing further harms pollinators by rendering certain species unable to function normally. Nonetheless, wealthy individuals continue



caring for lawns, even while environmental crises like the California droughts and shortages in the Colorado River basin emphasise the extreme threats to freshwater availability and species health. Rectangles of green grass bordered by expanses of brown flora are indicative of elite land, for upper-class individuals can easily pay the fines that are imposed for excessive water use. The middle class lawn, a symbol of aspiration in its mimesis of elite practices, dies off, thus making the classist, problematic nature of these landscapes much more apparent. Setbacks in restraining wasteful elite usage of precious resources speak to the strength of the elite landscape that is able to be preserved through wealth so that sophisticated appearances may carry on.

Similar to residential lawns, the more than 900 golf courses that exist within California unethically consume large quantities of water to maintain the sophisticated appearances of vast stretches of open land. In consideration of the unnecessarily large presence of golf courses, California Assembly Bill 672 sought to transform a portion of this land into affordable housing units. However, when faced with threats to the sustenance of elite landscapes, negative media coverage in regards to the proposed bill paired with lobbying efforts from Californian golf associations, industries, and other actors significantly deterred AB 672's progression. AB 672 died in the state assembly soon after, exhibiting the extent to which the elite landscape is deeply ingrained in American society. Not even drought conditions can deter elite actors from loosening their holds on the narrative that such landscapes are healthy and necessary. This suggests that more must be done to confront the powerful, wealth-driven networks that insist upon a stasis of scenery for the sake of sustaining social and/or financial capital.

Now more than ever, a cultural shift is possible. In the midst of nationwide crises when spotlights are placed on the negative impacts of elite practices, new ways of living can be embraced and empowered. Residential lawns and golf courses being the vision of attractive sophistication must change to allow place-based images of environmental beauty to prosper. In this way, lawns can become wild gardens free from the fears of judgement and lowering property values, allowing for various species of flora to bloom. In the realm of norm alterations, non-pecuniary methods



of changing behavior can be embraced, such as that of social comparison to heighten the appeal of alternative ways of living. Income-based fines can also be implemented to further encourage elite individuals who are not significantly impacted by excessive water use fines to alter their habits.

It must be noted that the environmental issues discussed here are not unique to California or even the United States as a whole. When viewing water waste in international resorts (Tang 2012), for one, it becomes clear that the interconnected web of elite interests extends globally, thus bringing to light a problem that requires an extensively coordinated movement to solve. The honed focus of this paper is not to minimise elite waste outside of the boundaries of the American empire. Rather, by focusing on waste in the expansive United States, which can counteract the climate crises mitigation efforts of other nations (see Hoekstra, Chapagain 2007; Themelis 2021), this paper serves as a call for equal responsibility (of elites and of nations).

To achieve these goals, there much work to do. Recently, on March 15, 2023, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (MWDSC) Board of Directors lifted emergency water use restrictions that had limited outdoor watering to one day per week. This action to allow increased lawn watering is said to reflect improvements in water availability following intense winter storms that led to evacuation orders, damaged levees, and flooding throughout the state (Sommer 2023). However, as the climate continues to change, experts recognise that drought conditions will likely return in California in the near future with Alvar Escriva-Bou, who performs research at the Public Policy Institute of California, stating, “California’s water system was designed for a climate we don’t have anymore. What we are seeing, especially in some parts of California, is that we have been using more water than we have. And that’s causing problems” (Sommer 2021). New extreme weather conditions will continue – that is a known fact. Thus, changes to particularly problematic practices must come swiftly and in full force to dismantle the wasteful, wealth-fueled landscapes that have been upheld by networks of elite actors for far too long.



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