

Let's talk turf!

A new series focusing on turfgrass topics from a social science perspective

By Michael R. Barnes, Ph.D.



LET'S BEGIN WITH who I am and how I got here. In the broadest sense I'm an environmental social scientist, a product of an undergraduate degree in psychology and a Ph.D. in natural resource sciences, with an advisor who encouraged interdisciplinary study even when it was challenging. This approach made me focus my work on applied problems – in other words, solving real-world problems that directly impact people. In other words, you can find me wherever nature and people meet.

Before we move on, it's important to address the question of why you should care about turfgrass lawns in the first place. The answer is because they are everywhere, and people like them. I know this seems simplistic, but broadly speaking, research tells us that (1) lawns exist on every continent but one (I'm looking at you, Antarctica), making them one of the most interacted-with forms of greenspace around the globe; and (2) when you ask folks how they feel about lawns, they generally like them for multiple reasons primarily related to opportunities for rest, relaxation, and socializing.

I never imagined a career of research focused on turfgrass. Nor had I even thought much about the turf that was under my feet as I played golf, soccer, football, or frisbee until halfway through my doctorate when I was invited to participate in a project related to low-input turfgrasses. That was when everything changed. Through numerous interactions with turfgrass researchers, seed and sod growers, land managers, grounds workers and superintendents, I came to appreciate the intricacies and complexity that the world of turf holds.

I remember explaining what I was working on to friends, family, and even colleagues who would look at me with a bewilderment on their face and say, “You mean like...grass? That's what you *study*?” And after I explained more about what I did, the stories would pour out. Stories about summer droughts, bad winters, a muddy soccer field or annoyance at a sizable divot on their last golf outing. People, once prompted, have fascinating stories to tell about their interactions with and views towards turfgrass, but I kept thinking...why does no one think about it the rest of the time? Why is there so little knowledge about turfgrass, and why are the majority of stories in popular media so negative towards turf?

From that starting place I ended up where I am now, a full-time researcher in the turfgrass science lab run, by Dr. Eric Watkins, where I address a wide range of questions at the intersection of people and turf. So how do I do what I do? Well, as an applied social scientist I use a variety of tools and methods to answer research questions. Most often, I use a mixed-methods approach, which means I use multiple methods to answer questions more holistically. Most often for me, this means a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explain not only the *what* but the *why*, both of which are critically important to decision makers (e.g., city councils, land managers, school boards). This is accomplished through the use of surveys, focus groups, and interviews with folks involved in whatever topic I'm working on.

Now that you know a bit about me and how I do my work, let's talk about what you can expect going forward in this series. *What to expect*: You can expect a wide range of topics involving turfgrass from a social science perspective, answering questions like where do lawns come from, why do they persist until today, and how have lawns changed over time. *What not to expect*: This series will not dive into the *natural science* aspects of lawns and turfgrass; that information is readily available from my colleagues in the turf science group (turf.umn.edu).

Coming in February: *A Brief History of Lawns*. Stay tuned!

Michael R. Barnes, Ph.D., is a Researcher and Lecturer in the Department of Horticultural Science. Dr. Barnes specializes in utilizing interdisciplinary approaches to understand complex socio-ecological-technological systems and works at the intersection of social science, sustainability, and health. For the last 5 years, he has sought to understand the relationships, ideas, and beliefs that shape and drive homeowners', land managers', and university officials' decisions in managing urban vegetation, specifically turfgrass.