

# GSSA Congress 40

*Alan Short*

This year's congress was one of the best-attended and, by all accounts, one of the most successful congresses we've had in years. It was also the first congress in four years solely arranged by the GSSA.

About 60 platform presentations were given, with another 30-odd posters. An interesting feature of this congress, and one that might prove to be a useful model for future congresses, was the five mini-symposia that were arranged, not by the congress organisers, but by the presenters themselves. Two of these symposia were half-day workshops, while the other three were two-hour sessions consisting of several coordinated papers around a common theme, with a short discussion at the end.

Susi Vetter and her colleagues from the Eastern Cape arranged a mini-workshop on communal rangelands (read a more detailed account of the workshop in this issue). The second workshop was arranged by Christo Fabricius and co-workers, and was on complex adaptive systems management. Both events were well-attended and generated a lot of discussion.

Sigrun Ammann and Dave Goodenough pulled together a variety of experts in the pasture industry to discuss endophytes in pastures. If you don't know what an endophyte is, don't worry, you're in good company. Endophytes are organisms that can infect grasses, with potentially both negative and positive consequences for farmers, depending on the type of endophyte and the infection level. The workshop was intended to be a farmer's day, but very few farmers arrived, most complaining that Port Shepstone was too far. However, the interest in the topic was demonstrated by the fact that several farmers asked for the show to be taken on the road.

Mark Hardy and colleagues arranged a session on integrated land-use planning, using the heavily transformed and poorly conserved Renosterveld as a case study. Unfortunately, their session ended up in the graveyard shift of the congress, and was therefore poorly attended, which didn't do justice to the quality of the papers and ideas discussed.

The fifth mini-symposium was a report-back on the multi-disciplinary Brotherton trial resurvey (reported on in the June 2004 issue of *Grassroots*), which generated some interesting results and useful discussion on fire, biodiversity and carbon sequestration, among other things.

The other sessions were arranged by the congress organisers in the traditional way, and there was a great variety of topics covered, from giraffe browsing to milk production from pastures. The Best Presentation and Best Poster judging was ably coordinated by Winstone Trollope and Mark Hardy, who seconded volunteers for each session to judge the speakers, based on criteria such as scientific credibility and clarity of presentation. In the end, Richard Fynn's talk, together with his co-authors Craig Morris and Kevin Kirkman, on plant strategies and species composition, was voted the Best Presentation. The Best Presentation by a Young Scientist was won by Luthando Dziba, who was not very far behind Richard in the overall points table, on how plant secondary compounds influence feeding behaviour of herbivores, which in turn influences species diversity of rangelands. The Best Poster was judged to be Gideon van Rensburg and Hennie Snyman's paper "Soil degradation impact on seedbank sustainability". Read the abstracts for the papers in this issue.

## Grassland summit

The most important single event at the congress was the Grassland Summit, arranged by Richard Hurt in collaboration with the National Grasslands Biodiversity Programme (NGBP), and facilitated by Pete Zacharias. This programme is an initiative of the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), with funding from the World Bank's Global Environmental Facility (GEF). The members of the GSSA have the expertise and the knowledge to contribute meaningfully to the NGBP, and the purpose of the summit was to explore, practically, how we could do that. A set of resolutions from the summit were adopted at the GSSA AGM that evening. They were:

1. The GSSA recognizes the value of the National Grassland Biodiversity Programme (NGBP), and wishes to identify with it.
2. The GSSA mandates council to investigate and pursue appropriate mechanisms for formalizing the relationship between the NGBP and the GSSA.
3. Council will report via Grassroots and the AGM on the progress emerging from this relationship.

## Beach parties and disco nights

The hotel laid on great entertainment. Ironically, the beach party was held next to the swimming pool, 50 yards from the beach, but nobody was worried about minor details like that. The one-man band had everyone dancing, until the neighbours complained, with a mixture of jazz, blues, kwaito and rock that kept the dance floor packed. The first night was a late one, but it didn't stop there. There were red eyes and grumpy "good mornings" all week. No doubt delegates stayed up late to talk business and drink tea.

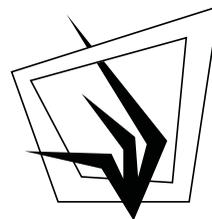
On the last day of the Congress, the sad news arrived that Denis Barnes, one of the founding members of the Society and a highly respected grassland scientist, had

passed away. At the dinner that evening, his old friend Norman Rethman gave a moving and eloquent tribute to his former colleague.

In the great tradition of congress, the contest for the coveted *faux pas* award was a close one. But, in the end, the judges' decision was unanimous. As the MC, Kevin Kirkman, explained, in the old days there were overhead projectors. A speaker could highlight a point by either placing his pen on the surface of the projector, thus projecting the pen's shadow onto the screen behind him; or he could point with a long stick directly at the screen. Of course, nowadays we have laptops, PowerPoint and laser pointers, and our pointing options are more limited. Rob Scott-Shaw seemed to have forgotten that, as for several minutes he stood in front of his peers happily highlighting interesting features of an aerial photograph by pointing his laser at the screen of the laptop, until his befuddled audience realised what was happening and gently corrected him.

## The bottom line

Financially, the congress was successful, and the Council can once again breathe a sigh of relief that this will not be the year that the Society folds. On a more serious note, the congress opened up some exciting possibilities for further activities that the GSSA and its members can get involved in, particularly the interest in endophytes from the top dairy farmers, and the GSSA's involvement with the National Grasslands Biodiversity Programme.



## **Congress 40 - Peter Edwards Award**

by John Clayton

The Peter Edwards Trophy is awarded at the annual GSSA Congress in recognition of outstanding contribution towards conservation farming in the province where the Congress is held. The recipients this year were Karel and Rika Landman who own and, together with their management team, run the Pongola Game Reserve on the northern section of the Pongolapoort Dam.

Their land use gradually changed from a beef enterprise in 1980, when they ran up to 2000 head of cattle on some 7150 ha, until 1992 when the last cattle were removed to concentrate on game. They run six camps - two catered lodges, four self catering camps (two of which are hunting camps), with a total capacity of 110 beds. The business has over 80 full time employees, 31 of whom are in managerial positions, with 58% of the management staff being black.

Approximately half of the 68 000 kg carcass weight removed annually is processed through their handling facilities to products required by their hunting clients. The enterprise brings in a gross of approximately R950/ha, which is well above the average return for beef ranching in the area.

Karel's commitment to the game industry in KZN was recognised by the Natal Game Ranchers Association when he became Honorary Life Member in 2000. The training facility which was established on the ranch in 2004 has to date enabled 89 students to complete a 14 day hunting guide course, as well as other courses that are run at this facility from time to time.

The Peter Edwards Award has found a very deserving home for the next 12 months.

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## **ENDOPHYTE IN PASTURES SYMPOSIUM**

**HELD AT GSSA CONGRESS 40:  
ENDOPHYTES, INSECTS  
AND PASTURES**

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by

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### **Reasons for a symposium discussing endophytes in pastures**

It is of utmost importance that the discussion and research on endophytes in pastures is given some attention in South Africa. This has long been part of the New Zealand and to some extent the Australian perennial ryegrass pasture scene. Some of this information is now spilling over to South Africa, especially the possible advantages of having such a fungal organism present in the pasture. However, there is very little information about the behaviour of endophytes, the real benefits under South African conditions and the possible disadvantages of endophytes for the South African pasture/dairy industry.

The purpose of the symposium was to start the discussion process and assess what knowledge base we have to date and what the critical research questions are. It is important that we understand the organism and its functioning under our climatic conditions before it becomes widespread throughout the industry. Perennial ryegrass seed with endophyte is already on sale in South Africa, although the extent is not known at present.

Various guest speakers were invited to give presentations at the symposium, which ended with a facilitated discussion. Professors Wijnand Swart and Schalk Louw from the University of the Free State, Andrew Beckerling of Profert, Jan Coetzer of Agricol