

A New Strategic Action Plan for the GSSA

Introduction

The Society has been in existence since 1966, and we have been privileged to have some of the top ecologists and agriculturalists in southern Africa as members, but times are changing and the Society needs to adapt. The pressures on the Society and its members are numerous; administrative workloads seem to be increasing, especially for formerly government-employed scientists who are now managers or independent consultants. In order to stay relevant in Africa in the 21st century, we need to have a clear vision of who we are and what we can offer.

Members of Council met on 28-29 April 2004 for a Strategic Planning Workshop at Ukulinga Research Farm in Pietermaritzburg. The meeting was facilitated by Mphoya Thobela, Richard Hurt and Nicky Allsopp. A record of the workshop was written by Sigrun Ammann. The workshop focused on the achievements and strengths of the GSSA, the values held in common by its membership and the challenges facing the GSSA. The activities associated with the various portfolios were also examined.

The core business of the GSSA was seen to be the promotion of the “discipline” of grazing resource sciences. The GSSA achieves this through promoting these sciences through its congress, journal and other publications. It aims to serve an advisory function by translating this science to achieve practical outcomes. This function embraces the areas of policy support, consultancies on environmental issues, and provision of information for advisors, land users and land owners.

The GSSA should serve as a body ensuring continuity in the feedback loops between theory and practice. Theory should inform policy, applied research and practice, while these should in turn inform theory in order to ensure that this remains dynamic.

Factors which ensure the well-being of the Society are its image and its sustainability. Image is determined by ensuring the visibility and credibility of the Society and projecting a professional profile. To this end the Society needs to market itself in order to compete with and complement other leading organisations in the environmental sphere.

The sustainability of the Society is dependent on maintaining and increasing membership numbers, ensuring that there is capacity in that membership to serve the Society, and in maintaining its finances in a positive state.

At a meeting in September, Mphoya Thobela, Richard Hurt and Nicky Allsopp developed a list of objectives aimed at strengthening the Society. They also revised the vision and mission of the GSSA. The outcomes of this meeting are presented below for comment by the members.

It was decided to use the word “grazing” resources, in order to make the vision, mission and objectives of the Society more accessible to the general public, even though “grazing and browsing” would be more precise.

For each strategic outcome, a target date, responsible person and set of activities was decided upon. These have been summarised under each strategic objective below.

Most of the objectives outlined below are aimed at promoting the Society as an organisation that has relevant expertise that can be called upon by government, non-governmental organisations, commercial organisations or private individuals at need. That, in turn, will make our Society stronger and more relevant in today's world. Several of the objectives are designed to make the Society function more efficiently by clearing up ambiguities in the constitution, or about the role of certain office-bearers.

Vision

The Grassland Society of Southern Africa strives to be the champion of the wise use of natural and cultivated grazing resources in Southern Africa.

Mission

The mission of the Grassland Society of Southern Africa is to advance livelihoods of the people of southern Africa and biodiversity conservation through the science and practice of wise use of natural and cultivated grazing resources.

Strategic objectives

Objective 1: To inform key roleplayers in the environmental field of the GSSA

Target date: Congress 40 (July 2005)

Responsibility: Nicky Allsopp

Activities:

The GSSA should identify and lobby key audiences at the highest levels of government to advertise who we are and what we have to offer. We need to clearly state what we want in return, such as support for young scientists, funding for staff to attend local and international congresses and for exchanges in Africa, and for interested parties to consult with the GSSA on important issues within our core disciplines.

Objective 2: To ensure that Congress adopts a relevant theme each year through which it can promote the Society to a broader audience.

This is not aimed at excluding the full range of presentations at a congress, but to ensure that relevant issues are tackled at Congress which attract the attention of a broader audience.

Target date: 18-24 months prior to the Congress being held

Responsibilities:

Congress 40: Richard Hurt

Congress 41: Nicky Allsopp and current Vice President (Annelene Swanepoel)
Thereafter Vice President

Activities:

The incoming Vice President must ensure that a successful bid is associated with a relevant theme for the Congress taking place at the end of his/her presidency.

Objective 3: To promote GSSA Congresses by ensuring that Congress announcements reach the broadest possible audience

Target date:

Annual activity to precede sending of first announcement of next Congress

Responsibility: Public Relations Officer, Administrator and Congress organiser

Activities:

Interest groups associated with the theme of the Congress need to be identified, and mailing lists of related organisations, such as agricultural or conservation organisations, need to be added to the GSSA mailing list. All delegates who have attended congresses and authors who have published papers in the Journal must be informed.

Objective 4: To ensure the translation of technical and scientific information into articles accessible to the public

Target date: Congress 40 AGM

Responsibility: Past President

Activities:

Members are encouraged to publish and present their research findings in the popular press and other forums. Articles based on work originally published in the Journal or other GSSA communications should have a short note at the end to acknowledge their source.

Objective 5: Promote the discipline through providing links from the discipline to relevant radio and television media

The aim of this is to promote the discipline in its broadest sense as being relevant to SA, not to focus on promotion of the Society.

Target date: Congress 40 AGM

Responsibility: Public Relations Officer

Activities:

Several radio and television programmes are broadcast which are of interest to the GSSA and its “clients”. These include agricultural programmes such as Agri TV on SABC2 and a lunchtime agricultural slot on Radio Sonder Grense, and the conservation programme 50/50 on SABC2. There are also a number of small community radio stations which have slots for agricultural discussion. There are many members of the Society who could contribute to such programmes, and they should contact the PRO (Nicky Findlay: findlayn@dae.kzntl.gov.za)

Objective 6: Develop a protocol to promote the Professional Affairs Committee (PAC) and Professional Members to the broader environment

Target date: AGM of Congress 40

Responsibility: Chair of PAC

Activities:

Develop creative ideas on how to promote PAC as professionals, consultants, ombudsman etc. Promotion of the Society as a whole will certainly be to the advantage of the Professional Members by making potential clients aware of the expertise in our membership.

Objective 7: Promote partnerships between the GSSA, SADC and researchers in other African countries

Target date: January Council meeting

Responsibility: Mphoya Thobela

Activities:

As Mphoya was unable to attend the January Council meeting, the target date has been moved to April.

Some proposals were made, such as arranging a tour for SADC representatives around the time of Congress 40, and working through the Centres of Excellence in livestock, indigenous knowledge and extension in the SADC countries.

Objective 8: To get ISI rating for the Journal

Target date: January Council meeting

Responsibility: Peter Scogings (Scientific Editor) to ensure that NISC (the publisher of the Journal) continues to seek ISI rating

Activities:

ISI rating is given to a select list of journals which meet accepted standards of science. Achieving ISI rating will greatly increase the profile of the Journal and those who publish in it. Pete Scogings reported at the January Council meeting that, as this is as much to the benefit of the publishers as to the Society, NISC is continuing to seek ISI rating.

Objective 9: To develop a new three year contract with NISC

Target date: January Council meeting

Responsibility: Annelie de Beer in consultation with Scientific Editor

Activities: Review existing contract with NISC and develop new three year contract. Several administrative and financial issues need to be discussed in the new contract.

The contract has been reviewed and will be renewed with minor changes.

Objective 10: To develop an advertising/advertorial strategy for Grassroots

Target date: January Council meeting

Responsibility: Grassroots Editor, Public Relations officer

Activities:

The Grassroots is only distributed to members at present. In order to reach a wider audience, it has been proposed that advertising revenue be sought in order to print more copies and distribute through outlets such as agricultural co-operatives. Although the broad outline of an advertising strategy has been discussed, this has yet to be implemented.

Objective 11: Resolve position of Web Coordinator and Grassroots Editor on Council

Target date: April Council Meeting

Responsibility: Nicky Allsopp

Activities:

Additional members to fill roles. If no suitable additional members are available, then members will be coopted to fill those posts.

Objective 12: To ensure that key administrative activities are executed timeously and effectively.

This refers especially to the maintenance of membership lists and the collection of subscription.

Target date: Every Council meeting

Responsibility: President assisted by Council

Activities:

Review activities of the Administrator on a regular basis, and ensure that the contract describes responsibilities adequately.

The current Administrator (Freyni du Toit) is doing an excellent job in rebuilding the administration of the Society after several years of poor management of this function by Council. This objective is regarded as strategic for ensuring the continued efficient administration of the Society.

Objective 13: Review constitution of the GSSA and propose relevant amendments

Target date: January Council Meeting

Responsibility: Justin du Toit to coordinate this activity.

All Council members to review constitution

Activities:

At the last AGM, two amendments were proposed. The first was a change to the membership structure. It was agreed that Retired members could choose not to receive the Journal, and thus pay a reduced fee. Some members who had retired from their professions no longer wished to receive the

journal, but wished to remain members of the GSSA and stay up-to-date with the Society's doings. The second amendment was that *bona fide* students would pay the same fee as Associate members for three years.

A proposed amendment to be considered at the July AGM was discussed at the January Council meeting. This proposed amendment deals with the number of people needed to form a quorum at a GSSA general meeting. At present, 50 members are required to call a meeting quorate, but it has proved to be very difficult to assemble that many members for years. The figure of 50 was decided on when the Society was first established and membership was much larger. Some constitutions don't require a specific number of people, but a certain proportion of the membership. It has been proposed that we reduce the number of members required to form a quorum (say to twenty or thirty) or work on a percentage (say 10%) of members.

Objective 14: Review strategic plan at regular intervals

Target date:

Major review: First Council meeting after congress.

Evaluate progress: every Council meeting

Responsibility: President to ensure that this appears on agenda of Council meetings.

Activities:

The action plan and progress made will be reviewed regularly by Council, in order to keep it relevant and up-to-date. The first review happened at the January Council meeting; in general, progress was reasonable on most of the objectives. As priorities change or objectives are met, the action plan will be revised.

Conclusion

This approach has proved to be a valuable tool in focusing the efforts of the GSSA and its members.

We would welcome comments from members on the strategic plan for the GSSA.

Send your comments to Grassroots.