

Congress 2007

Rhodes University, Grahamstown

Susi Vetter

Congress Organising Committee

This year's Congress was held at Rhodes University in Grahamstown in association with the Thicket Forum. The meeting was well-attended with nearly 250 delegates including some people who came only for the 2-day Thicket Forum programme. The joint meeting was a great success, thanks to a joint organising committee which worked closely together from the beginning and also the very similar interests of the two groups. Hopefully this will mean more GSSA members joining future Thicket Forum meetings and more "Thicketeers" joining the Grassland Society.

Over 80 platform papers and nearly 50 posters were presented, with posters being given a prominent position and enough time for short presentations. The Congress was off to a stimulating and thought-provoking (if technologically challenged) start with an opening address by the Vice Chancellor of Rhodes University, followed by three topical keynote addresses by international speakers.

Left: Richard Eckard
Right: Deep in discussion



Saleem Badat, the Rhodes VC, encouraged the Grassland Society to simultaneously tackle the biological, economic and social aspects of rangeland research, policy and development, and not to be afraid to tackle uncharted territory. Richard Eckard from the University of Melbourne spoke on the effect of intensive grazing systems on greenhouse gas emissions and some recent research efforts to understand and mitigate these. Urs Kreuter from Texas A&M University highlighted the need for integrating the human dimension in rangeland research and management and echoed the sentiments expressed in the opening address. Fred Provenza from Utah State University concluded the opening session with a talk about the links between animal genetics, learning, feeding behaviour and the impact of this on rangeland vegetation,



Photos: Graham Peddie

highlighting the opportunities an understanding of these presents for innovative and low-cost range management.

Fred's address set the scene for a symposium on linking plant-herbivore interactions theory to rangeland management. This was the first of several symposia and special sessions – others included papers and a discussion session around resource management issues facing emerging and communal farmers and a very successful day-long symposium on planted pastures and dairy farming. The Thicket Forum held a workshop around issues in the game industry, particularly the controversial topic of the impact and role of extralimital game species, and the National Range and Forage Working Group led a workshop around a new national rangeland monitoring programme. The crowd had a distinctly international flavour with delegates from Australia, the UK, the USA, Uganda, the Netherlands and Mozambique. A group of student from Texas A&M University attended the first day of the Congress.

Three fully subscribed post-Congress tours were held and by all accounts stimulating and much enjoyed. Winston Trollope and Wayne Vos took a group of 40 delegates to two private game reserves where they heard about the challenges and experiences involved in switching from livestock farming to wildlife conservation while keeping an eye open for the plentiful wildlife. Gillian McGregor took a tour to witness the

rehabilitation of old pineapple lands to healthy pastures under the management of the Yendalls, local farmers who have been keeping Nguni cattle. Pieter Conradie organised a tour to complement the dairy and pastures symposium which highlighted different dairy enterprises in the area.

The Congress venue seemed to get the thumbs up from our discerning conference goers, particularly those “young at heart” delegates who took the party to the nearby pub on several occasions! The Thicket Forum arranged a performance by local entertainers “Boet en Swaer” at their opening dinner on Tuesday evening. Although Swaer (or Boet?) was unavailable, Boet (or was it Swaer?) had people in stitches before the party animals of the Thicket Forum and the GSSA took to the dance floor. The final dinner was as always a highlight, celebrating the award winners and ending in a good party as only Grassland and Thicket folk know how!

I'm sure everybody who has been to one lately will agree that much of the credit for the growing success of the GSSA Congresses goes to Freyni whose professional attitude, financial know-how, people skills and hard work make it a joy to organise and attend the Congress. A big thank-you from the organising committee and delegates!

Those who missed the 2007 Congress – don't make the same mistake next year when the GSSA meets in Badplaas!

