

# Towards achieving our vision of advancing rangeland ecology and pasture management in Africa

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There are two points regarding the functioning of our Society that I would like to address this evening:

The first is that we have a sound, vibrant and growing Society.

Second, we need to proactively develop mechanisms whereby the Society encourages and facilitates membership of professionals, technical advisors, Agribusiness and practitioners whose livelihoods depend on the sustainable use of rangelands and pastures. These are the people at the coalface, who work at the level where our science really matters.

To expand on these points.

The Vision of the Grassland Society of Southern Africa is:

*Advancing rangeland ecology and pasture management in Africa*

And our Mission:

- *To be a dynamic and inclusive forum for scientists and practitioners in rangeland ecology and pasture management, and*
- *To champion the sustainable use of rangelands and pastures*

*for the benefit of people and the environment.*

We are going through difficult times but to focus briefly on our successes:

Our administration has never been stronger; Our financial woes are being addressed and, thanks to the support of the GSSA Trust, we are now in a process of rebuilding the financial viability of the Society with great success; We have a well managed and high quality, internationally recognised Journal; Through our newsletter and website we update members on relevant issues within our discipline and provide members the opportunity to exchange views on pertinent issues; The GSSA Trust has been revitalized; The Professional Affairs Committee (PAC) is now at full strength and in a better position to support our Professional members and attend to the Society's response protocol; Council is guided by a structured Strategic Plan.

We have re-structured the format of our Congresses so that besides providing opportunities for

members to present their research to their peers, we accommodate special sessions, workshops and symposia organised by members and interest groups. Judging from the registrations for this and the two previous congresses, members find this format to be stimulating and worthwhile.

### **Rangeland ecology dominates Congress**

Over the past 20 years or so issues involving rangeland ecology and management and ecology have dominated our congresses and publications. We have been very successful in providing a forum for scientists, technical advisors and managers in rangeland and wild-life conservation to present and discuss their work among their peers. Over the past decades we seem to have built an extensive knowledge-base on, for example: Fire and its role in vegetation management for various purposes; The response of individual species and plant communities to defoliation; Root growth of trees, shrubs and grasses; Preferred and avoided food types for domestic and wild animals; Restoration techniques; Plant/animal interactions; Rangelands and people; and many others.

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We know that this knowledge-base continues to grow and is being used by conservation agencies to manage conserved areas and is often incorporated into legislation.

My conclusion from the above is that we are indeed achieving at least part of our Vision and Mission — that is, to advance range ecology and to be a dynamic and inclusive forum for scientists in rangeland ecology; and we provide an administrative framework within which the membership can operate.

From this perspective the Society is sound and vibrant, and can look forward to an exciting future.

However, the Society must also strive to remain effective within the major changes that have occurred in the socio-

political and economic environment in South Africa in particular and southern Africa in general. These changes have had a massive impact on the role that Society members have traditionally played in developing understanding of rangeland function and process, and the development of systems that support sustainable use of resources.

In my opinion the current “soundness and vibrancy” of the Society is a function of the increasing dominance of rangeland ecology that has emerged over the past 15

to 20 years. Unfortunately there has been a parallel decline in the contribution to the Society's activities by traditional grassland scientists, pasture agronomists and practitioners. This is not to say that I believe there is anything wrong with having an enthusiastic, strong and active membership that is involved in all aspects of rangeland ecology. On the contrary, the Society is has come through difficult times with flying colours because of the enthusiastic contribution of these members. What we need, however, is to provide the framework within which we can achieve those parts of the Vision and Mission that "advances pasture management", provides a "forum for scientists and practitioners in pasture management" and "champions sustainable use of pastures".

### **The importance of the forage industry**

Pasture is used here in its wider meaning to include livestock production from both veld and cultivated pasture. Reference to the proceedings of our conferences, Journal and special publications during the first 25 years of the Society's existence, shows quite clearly that we have our roots in traditional pasture/grassland science. Much of the focus was on veld and pasture for livestock production. And rightly so: more than 70% of the land surface of South Africa (and much of the rest of Africa) is allocated to

some form of livestock production from veld. The rest is cultivated, urbanised or within conservation areas. And cultivated pastures comprise a significant proportion of the area under cultivation.

The structures that supported the traditional grassland science research and extension activities have largely been removed due to alternative policies guided by the socio-political and economic changes that have occurred in SA in the last decade and a half. The lack of job opportunities in pasture research and extension has dramatically reduced our membership in those fields. Universities have been forced to alter their curricula to provide training in fields where graduates have the potential for gainful employment. This has led to a downward spiral of membership involved in pasture management and quite naturally, fewer contributions to our congresses and publications from this sector of the Society. The decline in scientific and technical contribution from the pasture fraternity has reduced the networking opportunities for those members who are still involved in traditional pasture research and, naturally their motivation to remain involved in the Society. Similarly agribusiness has few incentives to remain involved in the Society, and few consultants or leading practitioners attend congress these days.

The cultivated pasture and forage production industry may seem foreign to many delegates here this

evening. How many of you are aware of the massive livestock industry that depends on cultivated pastures? Some examples:

- There are approximately 250 000ha dry land legume pastures in the Western Cape that form an integral part of the crop production system
- An estimated 200 000ha under irrigation and dry land pasture and forage production for the roughage requirements of the 2 500 million litre milk production industry (R5 billion turnover at farm level)
- A formal pasture and forage seed industry of approximately 15000 tons of seed for the local and export market, an industry worth approximately R150 million.
- A large and expanding beef production industry based on pastures.
- Added impact of climate change leading to an expectation by industry of marginal cropping areas being planted to pastures and forage crops in support of an expanding livestock industry.

What of the potential for pasture and forage crops in support of the developing agricultural sector, the millions of individuals whose livelihoods depend on livestock having access to rangelands? Is the knowledge base regarding livestock improvement and livestock systems that is being developed for our com-

munal grazing lands, discussed at our conferences and published in our Journal, reaching the right audience? Or are we simply serving academia?

While we might not have many experienced researchers, extension staff and advisors involved in pasture and forage production systems as members of our Society there is a formidable industry out there dependent on veld, pasture and forage crop production for their respective livelihoods. This industry is supported in the private sector by various Agribusiness enterprises with their own consultants and sales staff, private consultants, farm managers and the producers themselves. The public sector is involved mainly in supporting smallholder and emerging farmers. If we look at our membership, contributions to our conference proceedings and publications we have a very poor record in serving and supporting this major component of our Grassland Science discipline.

How do we rectify the imbalance and work towards achieving the goals imbedded in our vision and mission? There have been similar appeals in past Presidential addresses (e.g. Trollope (1985)– on development of sustainable livestock systems for developing agriculture, and Tainton (1987) on science for the sake of science or in support of the land user). I would like to remind delegates to this congress and members of the Society at large of some of the points made



Photo: Sheila Househam

Lucerne cultivar trial at Makhathini Research Station, Zululand

by Dave Goodenough during his address in 2002. He pointed out that 24% of the membership of the Grassland Society of New Zealand was made up of farmers. The Grassland Society of Victoria, Australia with a membership of 2000, of mainly farmers/producers and industry with about 200 scientist/researcher members. Similarly, farmers form a large proportion of the membership of the Australian Grassland Society and the Society for Range Management in the USA. Opportunities are provided for presentations by farmers/producers and interaction with researchers. I support Dave's call for "greater synergy with the farming community" but would stress that we need not look to "serve" that community but to facilitate the pasture and forage production Industry's active involvement in our Society so that they and we, as the scientific community, can use our combined wealth of knowledge and experience towards advancing pasture management in

Africa.

The Society's efforts aimed at making a meaningful contribution at farm scale to the broader pasture and forage production industry have not been successful. I believe that this is partially because we have not had, and still do not have, the capacity to maintain initiatives such as presentation of farmer's days and special symposia that address the needs of the Industry. Furthermore, while we have actively forged ahead and encouraged workshops and symposia on ecological issues at our annual conferences, we have not made the same efforts for issues involving pasture production.

### **A different approach**

I suggest that the Society takes a different approach. As stated before we have a strong professional and administrative structure that has the potential to provide a dynamic and inclusive forum for scientists and practitioners in rangeland ecology and pasture management. We should use this structure to facilitate closer contact/links with existing producer organisations such as the NWGA, RPO, MPO, SAN-SOR, the Pasture Association and the Grassland Development Trust. The GSSA should have a member of its Council responsible for maintaining links with these and similar organisations, and facilitating opportunities during our meetings for presenting symposia, special sessions and workshops that meet the com-

mon or individual scientific and technical management needs of those organisations. These organisations could also then draw on the Society's membership to assist them when presenting their own information days, or on the Society's Professional members to act as consultants if required. And we can maintain (enhance) our scientific integrity while doing so!

I strongly urge the Society to actively facilitate the inclusion of the broader pasture (including veld) and fodder production community/ Industry into our Society towards the achievement of our Vision of advancing rangeland ecology and pasture management in Africa.

## References

- Goodenough DCW 2002. Presidential Address - 2002: The Grassland Society of Southern Africa should be striving for greater synergy with the farming community. *African Journal of Range and Forage Science* 19: 79-80
- Trollope WSW 1985. Presidential Address: Third World challenges for pasture scientists in Southern Africa. *Journal of the Grassland Society of Southern Africa* 2(1) 14-17
- Tainton NM 1987. Presidential Address: Ethics, legislation and profit as determinants of conservation farming. *Journal of the Grassland Society of Southern Africa* 4(1) 5-6



## Congress opening address

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and we should not make the 'mistake' of 'equating popularization with trivialization, cheapening, or inaccuracy'.

He rightly states that 'the concepts of science, in all their richness and ambiguity, can be presented without any compromise, without any simplification counting as distortion, in language accessible to all... people'.

This stress on communicating beyond simply a scientific community is a call to ensure that our universities, as part of their knowledge generation and dissemination roles, engage actively with the South African public and act as catalysts of public education. After all, we are, as universities, meant to advance the public and social good.

I wish you an enjoyable stay at Rhodes University and in Rhini/ Grahamstown, a stimulating and productive congress and conference, and trust this occasion will contribute to the further development of the Grassland Society and Thicket forum and to future exchanges of this kind.

And, I declare this Joint 42<sup>nd</sup> Annual Congress of the Grassland Society of Southern Africa & 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Thicket Forum Meeting officially open!

