

Conclusion

Not only do emerging farmers lack sufficient land and finances, most have little technical knowledge of animal and veld management. Compounding these difficulties, communal farmers have the long recognized problem of sharing resources, conflicting objectives, and the complexity of communal management, while for many individual farmers; land tenure is an added problem.

Clearly, any attempt to improve the livelihood of emerging farmers will involve an integrated approach between the farmers and scientific, extension and social expertise, and government policy makers. Any intervention strategy will need to take into account resource constraints, risk management, and the social and economic objectives of the individual or group concerned. There needs to be a step-wise process to improve their well being, which generates resources that can be used to improve their well being further, and so on, in an incremental manner. Above all, the emphasis should not just be on improving veld condition or increasing beef or crop production, but must include developing sustainable livelihoods.



The 2007 Peter Edwards Award

Susi Vetter and Pieter Conradie

Congress Organising Committee
Email: S.Vetter@ru.ac.za

The Peter Edwards Trophy is awarded at the annual GSSA Congress to a land-user in the province in which the Congress is held. This prestigious award is presented in recognition of sound application of the principles of range and forage science and conservation. The aim of the award is to recognise top land-users in different areas of southern Africa and thereby encourage the wise use of natural resources. The award is named in memory of Peter Edwards, a pasture scientist who was born in Stutterheim in the Eastern Cape. The trophy was first awarded in 1981 when the GSSA congress was hosted in the Eastern Cape and since then, many outstanding livestock farmers and game ranchers have been added to the list of recipients.

The 2007 adjudication was done during late June, which is the driest and most challenging time of the year and we found this to be a good time to visually appraise the farms and see how farmers were managing. Our panel consisted of Tony Palmer (ARC, Livestock Business Division), Pieter Conradie (Döhne Agricultural Research Station) and

Susi Vetter (Botany Department, Rhodes University). Despite Tony and Pieter battling with different versions of the flu during our five days on the road, we thoroughly enjoyed the experience and returned inspired by what we saw on the five farms we visited.

The farms were found in diverse agro-ecological areas, from Karoo veld with an annual rainfall of less than 300mm to climax mountain veld where an annual rainfall of over 1000mm is not uncommon. While the Karoo farm had last seen rain in November 2006 at the time we visited, the farms around Bedford and Grahamstown had had record rainfalls in 2006 and early 2007, and the challenge there was coping with the prolific grass growth before it became tough and unpalatable. It was a challenge to compare these different farms and to identify a winner, and this was made even more difficult by the fact that all finalists were very impressive. All showed great commitment and creativity, applied sound conservation farming principles and were actively involved in their communities - and as a result achieved exceptionally high overall scores.

Despite the ecological differences, the farming approaches we observed had a lot in common. Each farmer had identified a veld management system suited to their resource and had adapted their livestock production system accordingly. All farmers we visited had felt the effects of lower or unstable meat and wool prices, higher input costs and

tougher labour laws and thus cut costs to a minimum by doing away with unnecessary activities. Only one of the finalists regularly provided supplementary feed - the others rarely if ever supplied extra feed and instead adjusted animal numbers to match the productivity of their veld.

All finalists had a small but stable staff component of between 4 and 8 workers - a third of the size a decade ago. This illustrates the efficient manner in which these farming systems are run, but also the full-time commitment and hard work each individual has to put in on a daily basis. Two of the farmers had established farm schools, one encouraged his workers to keep some own livestock on the farm and all provided solidly built and serviced housing for their staff.

Our finalists agreed that conservation farming is a long-term commitment, a lifestyle and a passion. This was illustrated by the fact that four of the finalists are third, fourth or fifth generations on the farm.

Our first visit took us to Lochart Ainslie at his farm Glen Gregor in the Kowie Valley near Bedford. The farm has been in the family since 1837 and Lochart represents the fifth generation. His son Hugh recently joined the farming venture. The main enterprise is cattle farming, with hunting as a side line. Lochart also keeps some Dorper sheep as well as a flock of boer goats to help control bush encroachment. Lochart is a pioneer in the battle against *Acacia karroo* encroachment which is a major challenge in the lower lying

sweetveld parts of his farm. He has hosted symposia on the subject and is actively combating encroachment using an integrated approach of mechanical clearing plus herbicide, fire and 1000 boer goats. The higher altitude parts of his farm represent a different challenge with *Cymbopogon*-dominated climax mountain veld. Lochart devised a system using patch burning and grazing by mature oxen which utilize and improve the mountain veld. As a result he has seen improved basal cover and species composition, reduced abundance of *Cymbopogon* and an increased carrying capacity of 600 large stock units. Lochart is also an active member of the local soil Conservation Committee and Farmers Association. He established the Mill Cricket Ground on his property with the historical mill as clubhouse and this is used a venue for local and international cricket matches. When we left we were convinced we had our winner and the remaining visits were mere formalities – but we were surprised and pleased to find some stiff competition out there.

Our next visit took us to Beacon Hill near Grahamstown. The farm is owned and run by John Gush and his son Richard. They have been active members of the Conservation Committee, the local study group and John has been a leader in the farming community for many years. John and Richard keep meticulous records of all enterprises on the farm, which include cattle, sheep, game and eco-tourism. Conservation works erected by John's father have

resulted in previously eroded areas beautifully stabilised and covered by bush and grass. We also saw some magnificent *Themeda*-dominated veld maintained by judicious grazing management and the use of fire. When Richard, a civil engineer, came to the farm in the late 1990s the need for additional enterprises was realised. In 2001 Amakhala Game Reserve was established together with five fellow farmers as partners. Amakhala is now one of the premier private game reserves in the area and the reserve and all lodges remain family run.

Rob Wilmot's farm Boekenhout is nearby in the Alicedale area. Rob is one of the few farmers in the area still successful with sheep farming, of which there is a long and proud history in his family. Much of the farm is on grassy fynbos and the challenge is thus preventing dominance of fynbos shrubs and utilising a grass sward which quickly grows and becomes unpalatable when not managed well. We saw a noticeable difference in the density of indigenous and alien bush between Rob's and the neighbouring property. Nevertheless, there are scattered clumps of indigenous bush on the farm which add shelter for sheep and plant diversity. A number of rare species such as *Oldenburgia grandis* (donkey ears) are well preserved on the farm. We were not surprised that Boekenhout has been used by the Eastern Cape Department of Agriculture as a benchmark for Grahamstown False Macchia veld type. Rob has served as chairperson of Farm-

ers' Association and Albany Conservation Committee and was recently chosen to serve as mentor to developing farmers on the revived Conservation Committee for Albany.

Tony and Lynn Phillips farm at Bucklands along the Great Fish River. The farm is now almost completely surrounded by conservation areas including the Great Fish River Reserve, which has increased the challenge posed by ticks and jackals. The vegetation type is Valley Bushveld, and we were delighted to find the veld in pristine condition – in considerable contrast to the neighbouring conservation area – with an impressive component of spekboom and excellent grass cover. Tony and Lynn started out as teachers but decided to make a career change and went to study at Grootfontein Agricultural College. They keep a combination of cattle (magnificent Bonsmara stud), Angora goats and hardy Dorper-Damara sheep. The grazing system is high impact grazing with cattle for two weeks, followed by goats for two weeks and then eleven months' rest. Water provision has been a big challenge but all of the many camps have good water points which, despite the intensive short duration grazing system, were surrounded by a dense grass sward. Lynn developed ecotourism on the farm, although the presence of hippo soon stopped the river rafting activities.

Our winners – by a narrow margin, but undisputed – were Trenly and Wilmari Spence who farm on Kriegerskraal in the Kamdeboo near

Graaff-Reinet. Trenly took over the farm in his early twenties after the death of his father. He developed the farm infrastructure, dividing large and heterogeneous grazing camps into a system of nearly 150 small camps which are intensively used. He developed underground water to provide permanent and sufficient water supply to all camps. He also extended his father's irrigated lucerne fields to 30 ha which he now mainly uses as a cash crop but which provide a buffer in extreme years. We were impressed to find that despite having had no rain in nearly eight months, and while his neighbours had been feeding their livestock for two months, Trenly still had ample grazing reserves and did not anticipate the need for supplementary feed. Trenly was the first farmer to introduce Nguni cattle to the area in 1997 and his example has been followed by several farmers in the area. He has since served as chairperson for the Nguni Stud Breeders Association. He now keeps equal proportions of Nguni cattle, Angora goats and hardy Dorper-Damara sheep which he keeps in mixed herds. This has proved to be effective in utilising the veld fully during short, intensive 3-day grazing spells, and also reduced the vulnerability to jackal predation. Despite criticism from many of his peers, Trenly developed, maintained and adapted his intense short-duration grazing system. He monitors his veld on a regular basis, measuring shrub and grass cover and keeping photographic records. He has documented



**Trenly and Wilmari Spence:
Good grass cover after 8
months of no rain in the Karoo**

improved plant cover and composition and also increased livestock productivity from 28 ha/LSU to 9 ha/LSU over 20 years of farming. He credits the full and non-selective utilisation followed by very long recovery periods which prevent the loss of palatable perennial shrubs and grasses in this arid environment. He has also undertaken veld reclamation in eroded areas using a 'happloeg' and introducing preferred grass species. Trenly and Wilmari are active in the local study group.

Altogether, our farm visits provided much food for thought on the future of farming in the province. Clearly some land is in excellent hands, and in some cases the next generation is showing an interest in continuing the farming venture. But there has also been a massive shift to game ranching, driven in part by very high prices offered for land by buyers from cities and overseas. While this is probably good news for

biodiversity and tourism, it also raises the question of the future of farming as more and more farming infrastructure is removed, farming communities and their social and educational facilities are becoming thinner and conflicts between farmers and game reserves become more common. We came away feeling that good farmers deserve all the recognition and support they can get and hope that the Peter Edwards Award makes a contribution to this.

**Our winners Trenly and Wilmari
Spence**

