

## Report on the 48th GSSA Congress at Modimolle, Limpopo Province

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The 48<sup>th</sup> GSSA congress was held between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> July 2013. It was hosted in the Limpopo Province at the Weesgerus Holiday Resort, Caravan Park and Conference Centre in Modimolle. The resort is situated approximately 150 km north of Pretoria in the Waterberg Mountain Sourveld. The congress had five keynote addresses on various topics, three of which were presented by our invited Australian delegates, as well as 39 platform and 39 poster presentations. Research proposal posters were also displayed at the congress.

Monday the 15<sup>th</sup> July accommodated a fire workshop hosted by Working on Fire. More than 150 people attended, of which most were farmers. Besides interesting presentations (i.e. legal aspects, veld management before and after fire, the role of fire protection associations, etc.) by various specialists in their fields, the definite highlight was the practical illustrations of spiral and racecourse ignition by helicopter that were demonstrated in the adjacent game camp of the Koro Creek golf estate. One of the highlights on the Tuesday was the session on “Encroachment by woody species”, which included several interesting presentations, including a presentation by Jock McMillan on practical

veld management and bush control at the Mabula Private Game Reserve and a general summary on the driving forces behind the bush encroachment process by Nico Smit.

As a follow-up on this session, the Wednesday afternoon mid-congress tour to the Mabula Private Game Reserve proved valuable in terms of practical considerations relating to bush encroachment. The behavior of veld subjected to different bush control strategies was highlighted, as well as the reaction of *Hyperthelia dissoluta* on different slashing frequencies over time. In the session on the ecology and control of indigenous and exotic plant species, hosted on the Wednesday, the main focus was on the control of *Seriphium plumosum* (slangbos), a species which featured in the fire workshop demonstration as extremely invasive in the Waterberg and very volatile when burned. Similarly, the mid-congress tour to Andre de Leeuw, who controls *Seriphium plumosum* by slashing, organic fertilizing of veld and high pressure grazing/hoof action, emphasized the subtle underlying theme of the congress, namely the quest to effectively control this invader.

The tour to Wayne Knight's farm linked well to his presentation in the session "Habitats and habits of wildlife" on the Wednesday morning, where his thoughts on and results with holistic veld management were well illustrated. Delegates attending the tour to Jacques Malan's property experienced his spectacular methods of successfully breeding rare game species.

The highlight on Thursday was the special morning session on forage legumes, followed by an afternoon session which focussed on cultivated pastures. Some of the biggest constraints in the past with fodder legumes were mentioned: the lack of farming skills, South Africa being more veld than cultivated pasture orientated, the influence thereof on the limited, fragmented research capacity and the lack of institutional understanding of the importance of forage legumes in pasture-based livestock systems. Recent research in Southern Africa, in collaboration with Australian researchers, showed that there is potential for using the following fodder legumes. More recent and promising research is on track in SA and included various trials on lucerne, seradella and *Lespedeza*.

The nine presentations in the planted pasture section showed an active interest in planted pastures by young researchers. Species included in the presentations included drought tolerant species like *Antheephora*, *Digitaria*, *Chloris*, *Panicum*, *Pennisetum* as well as temperate species like *Lolium*, *Festuca*, *Dactylis* and *Festulolium*. In the Southern Cape the importance of healthy soil was illustrated again. The important role of the temperate species in fodder flow planning was also illustrated.

The role of tuber fodder crops, like *Brassica*, *Beta*, *Raphanus* and *Cichorium*, are often neglected in South Africa. However with production figures of 5.5 t/ha and higher, obtained from Forage turnip (Barkant), Fodder radish (Nooitgedacht), Chicory (Chico) and Kale (KR 6099) it cannot be ignored.

At the post-congress tour to Nylsvley, Mary Scholes took us back in time to an era of research of which the results, even today, have international impact. A session covering the historical research activities of one of the biggest botanical research projects in the South African history, covering almost 30 years, was followed by a visit to the sites where several of our well-known older colleagues started their careers. Ceremonial procedures on the Monday evening included an opening address by the Vice-councillor of the University of Limpopo, Prof. Mokgalong, the presidential address by Lorraine van den Berg and the keynote address by Koko Khumalo, an economist at Ernest and Young.

We had the privilege to have the MEC of the Limpopo Department of Agriculture, Mr. Jacob Marule, as the guest of honour and presenter of the awards at the Gala Dinner on the Thursday evening. This year, two awards were presented. The Peter Edwards award was presented to Jock McMillan (Mabula Private Game Reserve), with Wayne Knight the runner up. For the first time, the GSSA award for the best upcoming farmer was given to Rachel Mamonare Mathabathe, a local livestock farmer from Mookgopong. Other awards include:

## Congress

Meritorious Award – Justin du Toit  
Peter Edwards - Jock McMillan  
Best Presentation - Izak Smit  
Best Presentation by Young Scientist -  
Paul J Gordijn  
Norman Rethman Planted Pastures –  
Janke van der Colf  
Best Poster - Janke van der Colf  
Best Research Proposal Poster - Megan  
B Simons

Overall, the congress was a success, both in terms of the presentations and the venue. A big positive was the number of young scientists that participated in this years' congress, especially in the sessions where research proposals were presented. In the interactive research proposal session, 16 research proposals were presented, indicating that the GSSA is growing stronger each year.



## Justin du Toit Receives the GSSA's Meritorious Award for his Exceptional Contribution to the Society

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Susi Vetter honoured one of the Grassland Society of Southern Africa members who has made an exceptional contribution to the GSSA. Those who have been around for the last ten or more years will know how much the Society has grown and changed in the last years. The credit goes to several committed and dynamic Council members, including presidents, the organising committees of the Congresses which have gone from strength to strength, our superhuman administrator Freyni and her team, and the members who support the Society and the annual Congress. But among the members, she singled out one person in particular, who has devoted an inordinate amount of time and energy serving the GSSA and promoting it, and who can take a good chunk of the credit for the healthy state the GSSA is in today.

It all started in January 1998, when a cohort of students (among them Freyni and myself) first attended the GSSA Congress. Those who were at Cedara that year will remember it fondly. For the first-timers, it was a heady mix of exciting science, new friendships and all-night partying that had us hooked immediately.

One student stood out in particular for his leadership skills, though at that stage they were largely focused on the social side of things, and included masterminding the dance-floor set-up consisting of Derick Swart's Audi reversed up to a patch of grass with the back open and the sound turned up. His John Travolta impersonation is now the stuff of legend.

Four years later, in 2002, Justin du Toit was recruited to the GSSA Council, fittingly as Public Relations Officer. He has served on Council ever since, and really blossomed in his portfolio as Honorary Treasurer, which he assumed in 2005, initially as acting Honorary Treasurer. It was his vision and leadership that helped bring the GSSA back from the brink of financial disaster and has assured that our financial situation has remained sound and healthy.

Justin joined the African Journal of Range & Forage Science as Assistant Editor in 2006 and has proven himself as one of the best and most dependable members of the team. He has done two 6-month stints as acting Editor-in-Chief while Susi was on sabbatical and maternity leave.

But what Susi really appreciated about Justin as Assistant Editor is that she could always get him to tackle the manuscripts she was too scared to assign to anyone else, knowing that he would tackle them with energy and good judgement – including manuscripts on esoteric topics like fuzzy logic modelling, epic review papers and any other material not for the faint-hearted. But Justin has gone beyond doing a great job in two challenging portfolios. He has also spearheaded and organised several successful symposia and workshops that have brought credit (and income) to the GSSA. More importantly perhaps, these events have contributed to research dissemination and capacity building, something the GSSA is committed to but which takes considerable commitment, vision and hard work to actually put into practice.

Justin has convened three symposia on grasslands in SA, including on grasslands, timber and fire and on rehabilitating grasslands, all of which were well-attended and well-received. He also conceived and convened the very successful Research Skills Workshops, the fifth of which is planned for 2014.

It is safe to say that most of us intend to contribute to our discipline and the GSSA. But we all know how hard it can be as professionals with demanding jobs and busy lives to make the time to play an active role and keep it up over several years. Without Justin's efforts, the GSSA would be nowhere near as thriving as it is today. I hope that Justin will continue to play this role and that other young members will follow his example.



Justin du Toit received the GSSA's Meritorious Award for his exceptional contribution to our Society at the 48<sup>th</sup> Congress in Modimolle.

# The Grassland Society of Southern Africa Congress

## The Experience of a First-timer

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**A**s an inexperienced first timer, the prospect of attending the GSSA congress and showcasing my poster was honestly quite daunting at first but after spending the week from 15-19 July 2013 at the congress in Modimolle with the society and other delegates, I had a totally different outlook on the whole event. The congress was the perfect platform for me as a young researcher to network, socialise with like-minded people and expand my body of knowledge where rangeland ecology was concerned.

The congress has undoubtedly facilitated my choice in pursuing a career in this field and has opened doors to so many opportunities that would not have been possible without the exposure endorsed by the GSSA. The keynote, platform as well as poster presentations were all informative and helped me gain insight into current problems that our country is facing in terms of rangeland resources and the sustainable use thereof. Since then I've been sifting through my notes trying to apply what I've learnt to my current honours project and can sincerely say that my concern and passion towards the area I'm working in has grown. The tools I've been equipped with through attendance have sparked even more enthusiasm in

me as a junior researcher and I look forward to working with Dr Igshaan Samuels as we try to extend my honours project into a possible masters research thesis. I took a keen interest in the work presented by Dr Susi Vetter on the Richtersveld as well as the presentation delivered by Devan McGranahan on fire regimes. Susi Vetter's work in particular has urged me to gain a better understanding about what exactly is happening behind the scenes in my study area and how this may be influencing the face value image we have of the rangeland. I hope that through my research in the future I will be able to give back to the communities that I'll be working with and help them to improve their understanding and use of their rangeland.

To conclude, I take my hat off to the GSSA for sponsoring young South Africans like myself and providing me with the opportunity to engage in a culturally diverse venture like this one. This congress will eventually pave the way for a generation that not only wants to conserve and protect what we've been blessed with as country, but also showcase what young South Africans have to offer the world in terms of sustainable rangeland use and production. GSSA definitely ROCKS!

## My First GSSA Congress

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**W**hen I think about my first GSSA congress, I have a stream of flashbacks of all the wonderful experiences I had. I never thought the experience would be so enlightening and pleasant at the same time. I still cannot stop talking about all the people I met and all the activities we did. The fire course, which was on the Monday, was so educational. When Professor Winston Trollope presented I had no idea who he was. My supervisor informed me that he was the “father of fire”, and after reading about him I now realized that I was in the presence of a legend.

I never thought that so much planning went into burning a veld. I always thought that one just lit a match, threw it in the veld and hoped for the best. That was one of the highlights of my week. I thoroughly enjoyed the fire management course and would attend again. I learned so much. The highlight of the fire course was the field demonstration. I was so excited and once we got to the field I could not wait for the demonstration to begin. In a matter of seconds, once the helicopter arrived, the veld was burning and even though we were warned about the heat being extreme, I thought the demonstrator was trying to scare us. To my surprise it felt as though I was next to the sun! It was really an “out of body” experience. I had the shivers, and could not wait to tell everyone about it. Even when my friend (Denisha Anand) and I assisted with some of the administrative work, we enjoyed it.

We also met an extremely adorable five year old, Max Du Toit, whom we still talk about today. We really had an enjoyable and memorable GSSA congress. Another highlight would be our mid-congress tour to the Jacques Malan Game Farm. It definitely gave me a new perspective on game farming and a taste of the farm life. The Safari drive was by far the best, as it was my first and I literally do not have the words to explain how much I enjoyed the experience.

Thursday during our poster session, I felt extremely intimidated by all the academics when I had to present my poster, as they are all experts in their field. I remember the nerves kicking in once I presented to the first person, at my station, I was a complete mess but after apologizing he allowed me to start again. And after that I could not stop talking about my poster. If I saw someone staring at it for less than five seconds, I roped them in and explained my poster to them. I gained so much from doing that session that I would gladly do it all over again. The Gala dinner ended the week on a very pleasant note; it was by far the best night of the week.

My first GSSA congress was a mind blowing experience, something that I would never have expected. I learned so much, met many different people, and GSSA has been one of my “2013 highlights”. This has been my first, but certainly not my last GSSA.

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