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THE TROPICAL GRASSLAND SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA—A PERSPECTIVE

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It is not unusual for a retiring President to review the addresses of predecessors before preparing his own report. I found this to be a useful exercise because it stimulated some thoughts on how well the Society had achieved its stated objectives. In 1970, after the society had passed through eight formative years, Norman Shaw in his Presidential address (Shaw 1971), reviewed the membership structure and the society's activities. Shaw observed that the proportion of primary producer membership was highest in those areas where the Society had conducted field meetings and where producers were engaged in pasture improvement. However, an overall decline in proportion of primary producer membership suggested a trend, toward a society predominantly of professional scientists. Shaw believed this to be "an undesirable and unnecessary development" and that it is important for the society to continue as a forum for all groups interested in development and use of tropical pastures. I support this view. Today is the Nineteenth Annual General Meeting and over the past few years some membership disquiet suggests that the Society has not fulfilled its role satisfactorily to all members; perhaps not an unexpected occurrence during the latter stages of a teenage period and as the Society approaches its majority. Such signs indicate at least that members are thinking in terms of the Society's function. It therefore appealed to me to have another look at our objectives, the structure of the Society and to draw a perspective for its future, as I see it.

It is appropriate to examine the Society's objectives and their relevance in meeting the perceived goals. The objectives are stated in the constitution in broad terms and are "to further knowledge of all aspects of the production, management and use of pastures and forages and to provide members with opportunities for the interchange of ideas and experiences relating thereto". Membership is open to anyone with a genuine interest in the topic. In practical terms, the Society serves as a specialist group interested in technical discussion about pastures. Farmers and graziers possess considerable technical knowledge and wide practical experience and should play an important role in the Society and its functions.

The Society then, was founded on the belief that a need existed for improving communication between primary producers, advisory services, service industries and scientists for mutual benefit and to improve pasture production in northern Australia. It was formed at a time when there was a rapid development in knowledge of pasture improvement through use of species relatively new to world agriculture; enthusiasm was at a high level and geared towards a "pasture revolution" in northern Australia. The Society was well placed to take an active role in these developments. As part of its objective of improving communication it published "Proceedings" which recorded addresses given at formal and field meetings; and in 1967 the journal "Tropical Grasslands" was established to publish original papers on topics relevant to tropical pastures; proceedings of meetings were also included. Later a Newsletter was produced to inform members of meetings and to provide a forum for exchange of views and comments. So much for the background—what of the Society's current status?

Membership

The present membership and the change that has occurred since November 1970 is shown in Table 1. The category "farmer" includes those engaged full time in primary production or who own farms and joined the Society for this reason; the

TABLE 1

Membership of the Tropical Grassland Society of Australia at 30th November 1970 and 1981

	Farmers		Professionals		Company		Total	
	1970	1981	1970	1981	1970	1981	1970	1981
N.E. Aust.	197	154 (35.8%)	247	264 (61.4%)	31	12 (2.8%)	475	430
Rest Aust.	6	4 (7.4%)	55	45 (93.2%)	4	5 (8.3%)	65	54
Total Aust.	203 (37.5%)	158 (33 %)	302 (56%)	309 (64 %)	35 (7%)	17 (3 %)	540	484
O'seas	9	20 (11.4%)	63	146 (82.9%)	5	10 (5.7%)	77	176
Total members:	212	178	365	455	40	27	617	660

"professional" group comprises those employed by Governments, tertiary institutions, service industries or members who joined through interest primarily relating to their occupation; it also includes students. Company membership includes those companies concerned with agricultural equipment, the seed trade, fertilizers or supplies and services.

Between 1970 and 1981 there was an overall increase in total membership of 7% and an overseas component comprising 27% (Table 1). Many of these members, and within the professional group as a whole, are scientists, but it is notable that 11.4% of overseas membership represents farmers and graziers actively engaged in pasture improvement and animal production. Within Australia, there has been a reduction of 22% of farmer members on the 1970 membership, which is a matter of some concern. A further breakdown on a geographical basis (Table 2) reveals an interesting change in the distribution of farmer members.

TABLE 2

Distribution of Membership of the Tropical Grassland Society in northern Australia November 1981

	Farmer	Professional	Company	Total
S.E. Qld	64 (22.7%)	211 (74.8%)	7 (2.5%)	282
Central Qld	85 (80.2%)	17 (16.0%)	4 (3.8%)	106
North of Townsville and Northern Territory	5 (11.9%)	36 (85.7%)	1 (2.4%)	42
	154 (35.8%)	264 (61.6%)	12 (2.6%)	430

I have considered S.E. Queensland to include northern N.S.W. and as far north as Bundaberg and western areas below this parallel; central Queensland includes members from Rockhampton west and north to Townsville, and the third area is from Townsville northwards including the Northern Territory. Of the total number of farmers, 41.6% are in S.E. Queensland and 55.2% in central Queensland; there has clearly been an increase in farmer membership in this region. Factors influencing the change in distribution of primary producer membership are difficult to define and there may be many. I think there are two major influences. Firstly, the Mackay section has actively and very successfully recruited new members, many of whom are farmers interested in building up mixed farming enterprises, including pasture seed production and beef cattle production, as an adjunct to cane farming. As they have not been dependant on pasture production as a sole source of income these farmers have been relatively free of the economic pressures operating on dairy and beef producers who are largely dependant on production from pastures in their farming systems. They may therefore have a greater opportunity and incentive for investment in improved pastures. In S.E. Queensland the number of dairy farmers has fallen dramatically over the past two decades, from 5200 in 1974–75 to approximately 3400 in 1979–80, which partly explains loss of some members. I have been unable to satisfactorily identify

whether farmers were in dairy or beef production because this was often not stated in the membership application. However, I suspect that financial constraint (in terms of cost of membership) is not a major cause of resignations, but rather that for some farmers the Society has not been able, in their perception, to fulfil their needs. At a very pragmatic level it should be recognised that the major concern of primary producers is to improve their livelihood in financial terms and unless they can utilise the information offered by the Society (use of species, fertilizer, pasture management etc.) to achieve these ends, they may lose interest. This raises questions of the relevance of our activities which I will return to later.

Activities

These have included organisation of field meetings, evening meetings with invited speakers, symposia and publication of the Journal and Newsletter. The Society has always placed emphasis on field meetings which are the major forum for contact with primary producers. Thus within the 59 ordinary meetings, visits have been undertaken to 65 commercial properties, and 16 research centres or agricultural companies. A feature has been the much higher attendance of farmers and graziers at these meetings. The Mackay section has also been active in this area but I do not have the details of visits to farms. The Society has held several joint meetings with the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Australian Society of Animal Production Queensland branches, and is a sponsor of the Stobbs Memorial Lecture.

The journal Tropical Grasslands has published 371 papers of which 237 were on aspects of pasture agronomy: 48 on fertilizers and plant nutrition: 64 on animal production and nutrition: 13 on timber regrowth control and 9 on pests or diseases: 55 papers were from overseas contributors. Some special issues of the Journal have been on specific subject areas *viz.* "Limitations to Dairy Production in the Tropics", "The Mulga Lands of Australia", a "Siratro Symposium" and "The Second Australian Conference on Tropical Pastures".

Subscribers to the Journal have increased substantially over the years, with a current distribution in broad geographical regions as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3

The number of subscribers (non-members) to the Tropical Grassland Society's journal "Tropical Grasslands".

Category	Australia	Overseas
Complimentary	3	9
Research Institutes	55	170
Universities	12	103
Colleges of Advanced Education	17	26
Company	7	49
Private	8	11
	102	368

Clearly the Journal has achieved an international status and this reflects great credit on the Society and its members, including farmers and graziers who's contributions to field days and the proceedings section of the Journal, provide a practical aspect to pasture utilization and management. It is an achievement not sought in the objectives of the Society, but one of which it can be justly proud. In addition the Society has sponsored publication of "The grasses of south-east Queensland" and its revision "The grasses of southern Queensland".

To return to the Journal, quite obviously not all papers published had a direct application in primary production, but the majority were, in my view, of value in improving an understanding of pasture species requirements, behaviour and production and had relevance for the farmer and grazier.

When one considers the above review in terms of furthering knowledge of pasture management and providing opportunities for interchange of ideas, then I think that there is no doubt that the objectives of the Society have been largely fulfilled. One therefore should examine more closely the expression of dissatisfaction by some primary producers, that the Society is not meeting their expectations. There appear to be two areas of complaint. Firstly, that scientific papers in the Journal are presented in a too technical form and therefore do not have great appeal. In fairness to the scientist it must be pointed out that publication of research results demands a standardised form of presentation that permits other scientists and extension workers to assess the results. If publication was in a form outside these fairly stringent guidelines, the merit and relevance of the papers, would be lost. Improvements may perhaps be made in the "Abstract" or "Discussion", to assess the relevance of the results to commercial practice. Alternatively, a more popular version of the article could be included in the Society's Newsletter.

The second ground for complaint appears to be a lack of relevance of many of the papers published in the journal to particular environments in which farmers operate. However, every farmer is aware of differences in production between paddocks on his own farm and that there is a range of factors causing this. He is probably also aware of the fact that experiments are designed to study only a few factors at a time and that this constraint has to be imposed on the experiment to obtain meaningful results. These results reflect the circumstances under which the experiment was conducted over a particular period of time, and no more than this. The relevance of the results to farming is in describing the effects of the treatments used and providing guidelines for interpretation and application in commercial practice.

Many of the papers contributed from overseas on research undertaken in similar environments to those in northern Australia, for example north-east Thailand and the savannas of Africa, are of particular interest in broadening our understanding of species response to management. Others have added new knowledge on pests and diseases or fertilizer responses and are equally as relevant to the primary producer as to the scientist.

A major function of the society is to provide facilities and an atmosphere for discussion of issues, at an informal level through ordinary meetings and perhaps especially at those held on farms. This offers an opportunity to the primary producer of contact on a personal level to discuss matters that are of concern, including research results. It has been suggested by previous Presidents (Shaw 1971, Paulsen 1976) that there should be more informal meetings in addition to the presently accepted field meetings. These could take the form of "farm walks" or evening discussions with small groups of interested members. I agree with this concept and feel that the time has come for such action to be taken. In practice the problem is an organisational one because the responsibility has resided with the executive committee based in Brisbane. This is not insurmountable. The success of any Society depends on the commitment of its members, and I feel sure that those members prepared to take the initiative in areas distant from Brisbane would be able to successfully organise such activities.

An alternative would be to form new sections or branches of the Society; this cannot be imposed on potential members but must be a result of an expression of active interest and a desire to belong to the Society. The formation of sections has not been a continuing success. The reason may well be, that the organisation of formal meetings has been a constraint, The success of the Mackay section I suspect, is that it has been able to blend practical interest with social activity. In a successful Grassland Society the practice of informal discussion between farmer and farmer or farmer and extension officer or scientist creates a mutual confidence and respect that is the basis for innovation and acceptance of risk on the part of the producer. Innovative primary producers inevitably take risks in any new endeavour and it may not always pay off, but they play a leading role in improving grassland production and in attaining a wider acceptance by others of the practical management involved.

The future

It is a rash man who attempts to predict future events but at least it gives pleasure to either adversaries or friends when he is proved wrong or right! In looking at the past history of the society, which is still relatively young in age, one is forced to accept that the trend has been towards an increase in membership of the professional group, particularly scientists, and a decrease in primary producer members. A continued trend in this direction is undesirable and would not only defeat the objectives of the Society but would in my view be a disaster for researcher-producer interaction and restrict impetus in grassland improvement and management. It is of some consequence to observe that in similarly orientated societies emphasis is placed on this interaction. Let me quote from an editorial in the British Grassland Society publication "Grass Farmer" of 1978. The editor states "I cannot emphasise too strongly the need for an increasing interchange of knowledge and ideas between all sections of membership, and particularly between research workers, advisory services and farmers; for a greater British Grassland Society membership of our leading grassland farmers to strengthen the bridge between science and practice . . .". I would also like to recall some comments from a New Zealand farmer and member of the New Zealand Grassland Association in an address in its 50th Jubilee Year "For a period of fifty years we have taken the scientists and teachers around the country to meet the farmers, so that in all areas the keener farmers are able to meet and hear them. We have also taken some farmers to meet other farmers. These have learned a great deal of technical knowledge faster than they would have by any other means and, more importantly, they have been helped to do much better original thinking and often experimentation. . . . For the individual farmer this sort of thing makes his occupation a more satisfying one. . . . It is reasonable to assume that the scientists have gained from their contacts and that the teachers, both those in institutions and those in extension, have been improved and encouraged in their work."—(Inglis 1980). The views so expreseed reinforce the concepts on which our Society is based.

Is there a need for the Society to change its form of meeting or its organisation? Perhaps a consideration of the way other societies operate might help. In the U.K. the British Grassland Society operates on a two tier structure, The Society itself is basically scientifically orientated although it has a farmer membership. It also has affiliated to it local grassland Societies that have a more practical orientation. I personally do not see this as a satisfactory approach operating in Australia, because it limits the opportunity for close farmer-scientist interaction, and at a time when our experience and knowledge of pasture management is still limited this contact needs to be increased. In New Zealand, the Grassland Association (formed in the early 1930's) holds one annual meeting over 2–3 days based at a regional centre. The conference theme is usually directed towards farming in that region. These conferences are well attended by primary producers who also present papers, and the Society obviously functions extremely well and has an increasing membership of the primary producer component. The concept of holding a field meeting in a region with a theme relevant to that region is appealing and perhaps our Society should consider this as a major function in alternate years. The theme however should be more broadly based than that of just the agronomy and production of pastures and could include applied economic and management aspects. I have stated earlier the need for more informal meetings and through these, better contacts with producers would be obtained—even an attendance

TABLE 4

Distribution of the journal "Tropical Grasslands" by subscription, November 1981

Major region:	N. America	Latin America	Africa	Europe	S.E. Asia	Rest of Asia	S. Pacific
Number of subscriptions	59	91	42	64	43	49	20

Total: 368 to 70 countries.

of 10-12 would be of value. However, one has to realise that a major problem in northern Australia, is that of a relatively small primary producer population and its geographic dispersion that present difficulties in sustaining group activities. Further, producers may belong to or have interests in a number of other producer associations and these not only compete with each other for their attendance but also with our Society's meetings.

I think we should adopt a more positive and aggressive role in bringing the producers attention to the activities of the Society. After all, the dependance of the beef industry in northern Australia is on grazed pastures, their management and improvement. The Society is in a unique position to help disseminate knowledge of pasture production and management through the forum provided for producers, scientists and advisers. I suspect that the lack of interest from some producers has been because they see the Society's activity too closely related to improved sown pastures and a neglect of the problems of pasture production and management in the vast areas of native pastures in northern Australia. These areas are not excluded in the objectives of the Society, and it should give more consideration to native pastures and particularly their integrated use with sown pastures. In addition, with more areas being brought into crop production, the importance of short term pastures in cropping systems should receive some consideration in our activities.

There are other ways where the Society could be more active. The report from the executive at this A.G.M. recorded moves to be more intimately associated with field meetings of the state Department of Primary Industries and the pasture competition organised by the Royal National Association. There appears to me to be no reason why the Society should not organise its own pasture competitions or assume this responsibility in northern Australia. I wonder also whether the Society should not make a more positive approach to the popular media to obtain a greater exposure for its activities and objectives and alert other rural producers of its role.

The environmental stresses in northern Australia and recurrent economic pressures pose substantial problems for primary producers. The role of the Society should be one that seeks to improve the application of science and dissemination of knowledge to alleviate these problems and improve the efficiency of production.

In conclusion I wish to say that it has been an honour to serve the Society as President. I am confident, that with committment by members, the Society will develop into a vibrant and influential one and maintain a position of leadership in the area of pasture production and management, that will not only benefit Australia but also other countries that are engaged in development of tropical pastures.

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