

The Tropical Grassland Society of Australia Inc. — our current status

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Introduction

The Tropical Grassland Society of Australia (TGS) was formed in 1963 and incorporated in 1987 to communicate information on tropical pastures to primary producers and scientists, improve the relevance of research and promote the findings of both Australian and overseas research. The Society achieves these aims by:

- producing 4 issues per year of the journal *Tropical Grasslands* and 6 issues of the TGS newsletter;
- publishing occasional publications on tropical pastures;
- providing a sales service for books on tropical pastures and other relevant topics;
- sponsoring annual awards in university pasture science and a school essay competition;
- promoting good pasture development and management through an annual pasture award; and
- organising farm walks and field days.

The Society recognises the need to review its activities on a regular basis. In its 33-year history, the activities of the Society have been reviewed on 4 occasions (Shaw 1971; Poulsen 1976; Evans 1982; Minson 1987). Shaw (1971) predicted that the Society would probably become more professional, but saw this as 'unnecessary and undesirable' and suggested more farm walks. Poulsen (1976) suggested a change in subject matter with more information on land preparation and planting, fertiliser and maintenance costs, commercial carrying

capacities of different pasture types, and cost-benefit and economic studies. Evans (1982) stressed the importance of the interaction between scientist and producer, and called for more emphasis on native pastures. Minson (1987) suggested holding field days away from the Brisbane area and the production of a newsletter to improve communication between researchers, extension workers and producers.

Since those reports were written, many of the suggested changes to the activities of the Society have occurred:

- TGS has become more professional;
- the suggested farm walks are now largely organised by local producer groups, the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and landcare groups; and
- more information has been provided on native pastures and pasture establishment.

However, the Society has probably not covered the cost-benefit aspect adequately, and communication can always be improved.

Prior to 1986, TGS provided the journal to libraries and institutions on a subscription basis and all members were 'full' members. In 1986, provision was made for 2 types of membership; journal membership is aimed primarily at scientists and extension personnel and these members receive both the journal and the newsletter; newsletter membership caters for primary producers and members requiring less technical information and provides the newsletter only. Subscription to the journal only is still available to institutions and libraries.

Over the past 2 years, the Executive has reviewed the Society's current activities and is considering its future role. As part of this process, an occupational survey of members was conducted in 1995. The Executive aims to use this knowledge of the membership structure to target the Society's activities more effectively.

Membership and subscription numbers

Overall numbers

Journal membership fell progressively from 657 (1973) to 373 (1986) and 283 (1987), but has remained fairly constant for the last 7 years (Figure 1). Part of the drop from 1986 to 1987 can be attributed to the introduction of newsletter membership in 1987. Subscriptions have fallen from a high of 502 in 1980 to 214 in 1995, with a slower but steady fall of 19% over the last 7 years. Of the 54 members present at the formation of the Society in 1963 (Minson 1987), 20 were still members in 1995.

Occupations

Somewhat surprisingly, primary producers (graziers and farmers) have represented about 17% of journal members since 1986, and, while they comprise 49% of newsletter members, there are still more journal than newsletter members

amongst primary producers (Table 1). For all other categories of occupation, the proportion of journal members exceeded 70%. Tertiary students, agribusiness personnel, university employees and government researchers showed the highest preference for journal membership (over 80%), while teachers and consultants were less likely to choose this option (Table 1).

Regions

Over 90% of newsletter members are from Australia (Table 2), with the remainder from Zimbabwe, Papua New Guinea, USA and Japan. By contrast, 77% of journal members come from Australia, the remaining 23% coming from 34 other countries.

Within Australia, members are still concentrated in south-east Queensland (Table 2), although the percentage in the south-east declined from 46% to 39% since 1986, and increased in other areas of Queensland from 21% to 28%. The numbers from the rest of Australia

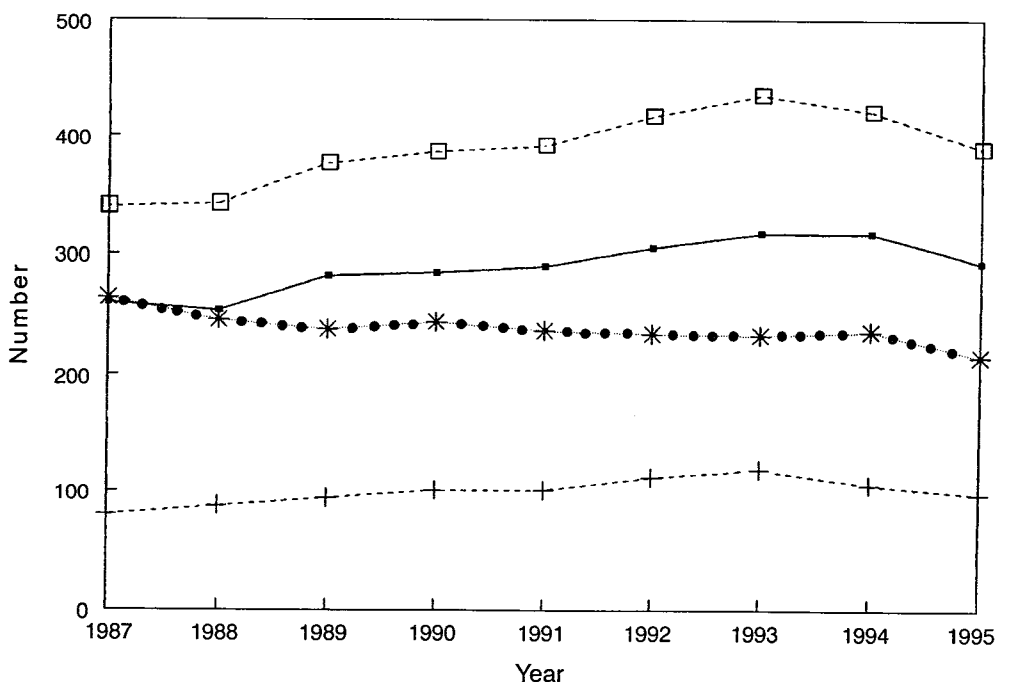


Figure 1. Number of journal (—□—) and newsletter (- - □ - -) members, subscribers (•••••), and total (- - * - -) membership for the period 1987–1995.

and overseas have remained static at approximately 14% and 20%, respectively. It is gratifying to see that TGS activities away from south-east Queensland in recent years are having a positive effect on membership. Shaw (1971) also noted that membership rose in areas where the Society had been active.

Table 1. Occupations of journal and newsletter members in 1995.

Occupation	Journal		Newsletter		Overall
	No	%	No	%	%
Farmer/Grazier	51	17.5	47	49.0	25.2
Consultant	27	9.3	10	10.4	9.5
Agribusiness	25	8.6	3	3.1	7.2
University employee	31	10.6	5	5.2	9.3
Government researcher	102	34.9	21	21.9	31.7
Extension officer/Adviser	22	7.5	5	5.2	7.0
Teacher	5	1.7	2	2.1	1.8
Student (tertiary)	19	6.5	—	—	4.9
Other and unknown	10	3.4	3	3.1	3.4
TOTAL	292	100.0	96	100.0	100.0

The proportion of overseas subscriptions (79%) is the same as in 1981, but fewer countries are now represented (40 vs 70) and the distribution has changed considerably. There has been an increase in the proportion of overseas subscriptions into north America (16% to 30%) and Europe (17% to 23%), and a decrease in the proportion into Latin America (25% to 15%), Africa (11% to 8%), south-east Asia (12% to 7%) and the southern Pacific (6% to 4%), while the rest of Asia remained constant at 13%.

Journal

The focus of the journal content has become more technical since 1987. Prior to this, field day proceedings and some non-technical information were included in the journal, but now these articles are included in the newsletter. The proportion of articles emanating from overseas research has increased from 30% (1981) to 66% (1994-95), and included articles from 14 countries.

Table 2. Location of journal and newsletter members and journal subscribers in 1995.

Country	Journal members		Newsletter members		Total members		Journal subscribers	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Overall								
Australia	225	77	87	91	312	80	45	21
Argentina	5	2	1	1	6	2	2	1
Brazil	5	2	—	—	5	1	13	6
Great Britain	3	1	—	—	3	<1	9	4
Japan	5	2	1	1	6	2	11	5
Netherlands	2	<1	—	—	2	<1	18	8
USA	4	1	1	1	5	1	44	21
Other	43	15	6	6	49	13	72	34
Total	292	100	96	100	388	100	214	100
Within Australia								
Queensland								
— SE Qld	110	38	42	44	152	39	13	6
— rest	77	26	32	33	109	28	5	2
New South Wales	19	6	9	9 ⁺	28	7	12	6
Victoria	3	1	1	1	4	1	4	2
South Australia	2	1	—	—	2	<1	—	—
Western Australia	5	2	—	—	5	1	4	2
Northern Territory	7	2	2	2 ⁺	9	2	5	2
Tasmania	1	<1	—	—	1	<1	—	—
ACT	1	<1	1	1	2	<1	2	1
Total	225	77	87	91	312	80	45	21

⁺9+ means >9 but <10.

Future direction

The analysis of change in membership numbers shows no relationship with any particular occupation, but rather a general loss of members and subscribers. However, the drop in subscribers from tropical pasture growing areas such as Latin America, Africa and south-east Asia is a concern. Possible reasons for the losses in these areas are the extensive summary of the journal provided by CIAT (in Spanish) to south American countries, and the availability of other publications covering the wet tropics of south-east Asia. These losses can be addressed only by TGS promoting the journal and encouraging articles of relevance to the respective areas.

The Executive has defined the future roles for TGS as promoting good pasture science and pasture management through awards, field days and sponsorships, and filling part of the gap left by the declining public sector resource in the fields of pasture extension and professional training. The Society aims to fill this information gap by holding specialised training workshops and linking with other special events such as 'Meat for Profit' days.

With this redirection, TGS has the opportunity to grow from its present base. As well as maintaining its world-wide scientific links through the journal, it should continue to provide practical information through the newsletter, special workshops, pasture awards and book sales. Book sales now gross around \$20 000 a year, almost double that of 9 years ago. The exchange of information between producers and research workers will be enhanced if researchers, extension workers, consultants and producers can be encouraged to use the newsletter to communicate.

The Society must keep a focus on issues of concern to primary producers, particularly as they represent 25% of the members. It must answer their questions on pastures and environmental issues associated with both native and improved pastures. At the same time, with more than half the journal papers coming from overseas, TGS must cater for this wider area of interest, while supporting local scientific interest through university pasture science prizes, sponsorship of student projects and school essay/poster competitions.

The decreasing number of public sector workers, along with the current 'user pays' attitude, means that TGS has to pay for people to organise and carry out some of its activities. To fund these, the Society needs to grow.

TGS has already embarked on the new direction by initiating and organising a 2-day training course preceding the 5th Australian Tropical Pastures Conference in Atherton, north Queensland, in June 1995. The workshop, attended by producers, researchers, educators and agribusiness personnel, covered aspects of feed improvement and management; animal nutrition; breeding and herd management for beef, dairy and wool production; economics; and constraints and opportunities for the beef, dairy and wool industries, and was well received. Participants indicated a desire for more discussion time and a higher producer representation at any future workshop. The conference, also initiated and organised by TGS, was successful and highlighted some major points for attention: a rationale for adoption of new or genetically enhanced pasture plants; technology support for commercial management decisions and a balance between production and conservation; field indicators of beef cattle dietary needs and a better understanding of the interaction between plants and animals; optimising products to market specifications in variable environments; and reducing unit costs in tropical dairying. The Society must address these issues. The proceedings of the conference have been published in *Tropical Grasslands* 30, No 1.

In a further attempt not to develop a south-east Queensland bias, the Executive has appointed Dr C.P. (Joe) Miller from north Queensland as the 1997 president elect. This, coupled with planned media releases by the president, targeted workshops and good communication, will help the Society to grow and improve its relevance to its members.

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