

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS*

**THE TROPICAL GRASSLAND SOCIETY—ITS ACTIVITIES,
MEMBERSHIP AND FUTURE**

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There were two things I wanted to do about the Annual General Meeting this year—I succeeded in one case but failed in the other. I thought it would be a good idea to hold it at some place other than Brisbane so that it might be accessible to a different group of members, and arising out of this I thought we might combine it with a field meeting. This is where I had my small victory and I hope you will feel that it has been worth-while. The second thing I wanted to do was to dispense with a formal Presidential Address, but as you can see I failed in this. This may sound like a rather selfish objective, and I admit that the temptation to do nothing about an address was strong, but I quite honestly felt that the prospect of having to give a Presidential Address might well deter some members, particularly primary producer members, from accepting nomination. I think it is much easier for an agricultural scientist to find a topic for an address than for a farmer or grazier and I think it is important that we do everything possible to encourage active participation by primary producers in the affairs and management of the Society. But the other members of the Committee felt quite strongly that a Presidential Address was needed and I had to give in.

I have chosen as my topic—The Tropical Grassland Society, Its Activities, Its Membership, and Its Future. To develop this topic I want to talk a little about the history of the Society and what it has done to serve its members, about the membership and the proportion of different categories of members, and a little about the future of the Society.

THE SOCIETY AND ITS ACTIVITIES

The Tropical Grassland Society of Australia is still very young—only eight years old. After a series of discussions among interested people and a preliminary meeting, it came into being at a meeting in Brisbane on February 12, 1963. Interest was quite high from the start and at the first Annual General Meeting the inaugural President, Mr. J. S. Pulsford, was able to report that there were 253 members. Membership has grown steadily to the present figure of 617. In August 1966 the Society extended its activities by the formation of the Burnett Section.

The Society has set out to serve its members through meetings and publications. Today we are participating in the 37th meeting that has been held, six of these being meetings of the Burnett Section. The policy of the parent body up until now has been to hold four meetings a year, these being two field meetings (sometimes extending beyond one day), one evening meeting in Brisbane, and the Annual General Meeting. This year has been an exception in that we have held three field meetings and we have combined the A.G.M. with one of them. The field meetings have included visits to research stations, farms, and a fertilizer factory, and they have ranged from Calliope to Lismore in a north-south direction, and from the coast to the Warwick-Stanthorpe areas, to Dalby, Warra and Moonie, and to Theodore.

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Talks at evening meetings in Brisbane have for the most part been given by agricultural scientists on some aspect of their work. In 1968 and 1969 symposia were held with three speakers dealing with different aspects of a chosen theme. Earlier this year we combined a symposium with a field meeting.

In the publications field the Society in its early years published Proceedings which recorded the addresses given at meetings plus descriptions of some of the demonstrations at field meetings. In 1967 a much more ambitious venture was started with the formation of the journal TROPICAL GRASSLANDS. This publishes original papers on topics concerned with various aspects of tropical pastures, as well as the Proceedings of meetings. TROPICAL GRASSLANDS is now firmly established with a large and increasing number of non-member subscribers in Australia and other countries. In addition there is the Newsletter which serves to advise members about meetings. This year a new section called "Members' Forum" was added to the Newsletter to provide a venue for members to exchange experiences and ideas about pastures.

MEMBERSHIP

You will recall that at the last A.G.M. and in the January Newsletter of this year, I reported that the Committee was concerned about an apparent trend towards a lowering of the percentage of primary producers among our members. The position was not entirely clear so I examined the records more closely, and on the basis of information given on their application forms I classified members as farmers, professionals, or companies. The category "farmer" includes all those whose main activity is some form of primary production plus those who have some other occupation but who also own a farm and who clearly joined the Society because of this. The category "professional" includes agricultural scientists employed by governments, universities, and industry, members belonging to firms concerned with agricultural equipment, supplies and services, and generally all those who joined the Society as a result of something to do with their work. There are a few members who have joined out of general interest and for simplicity I have included these with the "professionals". Thus the "professionals" are rather mixed, but as my main interest lies in the proportion of farmers to total members this does not matter.

TABLE 1
Society membership at 30th November, 1970

	<i>Farmers</i>	<i>Professionals</i>	<i>Companies</i>	<i>Total</i>
North-east Australia	197 (41.5%)	247 (52.0%)	31 (6.5%)	475
Rest of Australia	6 (9.2%)	55 (84.6%)	4 (6.2%)	65
Overseas Countries	9 (11.7%)	63 (81.8%)	5 (6.5%)	77
TOTAL	212 (34.4%)	365 (59.1%)	40 (6.5%)	617

Table 1 shows the position at present. Farmers comprise 34.4% of the total membership of 617. In this table I have also split the members on a geographical basis into those in north-eastern Australia (i.e. Queensland plus the Far North Coast region of New South Wales, which are the areas most directly served by the Society), those in the rest of Australia, and those in overseas countries. You will see that this greatly changes the picture. Almost all our farmer members are in north-eastern Australia and their percentage jumps from 34.4 to 41.5%. Correspondingly the percentage of "professionals" is very high in the rest of Australia and in overseas countries, and most of these are scientists. I think this is what one might expect. Grassland farmers in southern Australia are concerned with temperate

pastures and are not likely to be greatly interested in our Society, whereas agricultural scientists concerned with grasslands are much more likely to be interested because something new might emerge in grassland science or practice which could have relevance to their own work.

In passing, the number of overseas members is interesting. At the end of 1967 they numbered only about 16; now there are 77 and 27 of them joined this year. The reason for this big increase was the XIth International Grassland Congress which was held at Surfers Paradise in April of this year. Australia is currently leading the world in research on tropical pastures and I think we can expect to get more overseas members. The main attraction to them is TROPICAL GRASSLANDS.

Returning to Table 1, the overall position regarding farmer membership in north-eastern Australia looks reasonably satisfactory and I do not think there is any evidence of a trend towards a decreasing proportion. But we can learn more about the situation by looking at the numbers in different parts of this area.

TABLE 2
Society membership in North-east Australia

	<i>Farmers</i>	<i>Professionals</i>	<i>Companies</i>	<i>Total</i>
Brisbane	22 (14.2%)	113 (72.9%)	20 (12.9%)	155
Other areas where Society has been active	149 (59.6%)	91 (36.4%)	10 (4.0%)	250
North and west Queensland	26 (37.1%)	43 (61.4%)	1 (1.4%)	70
TOTAL	197	247	31	475

In Table 2 I have divided north-eastern Australia into three parts. In Brisbane most of the members are "professionals" which is exactly what one might expect. But look at the other two sub-divisions—in the rest of the area where the Society has been active farmers constitute almost 60% of the members, whereas in northern and western Queensland the total numbers are very small and farmers are in the minority. One other point of particular interest is that in the area served by the Burnett Section farmers outnumber "professionals" by 2 to 1.

We can also learn something from the records of resignations and of memberships terminated for arrears of subscriptions. Resignations over eight years total 81 of whom 57 were in areas where the Society had been most active and half of these were farmers. Change of occupation (farmers retiring, professionals changing jobs etc.) accounted for 40% of the resignations and only five members stated that they were dissatisfied. But 44% made no comment and we must assume that a good many of these were dissatisfied also. A total of 98 memberships have been terminated; 82 of these were in the area of main Society activity and 45 of these were farmers. Almost half of them joined in the first year. Many of these people may have joined in a burst of enthusiasm for a new Society and subsequently lost interest. I think that we must always expect some of this sort of thing to happen and it does not necessarily represent failure by the Society. The drought must also have been a factor in some cases. However, one final point to note is that while farmers represent 38% of the total number of members joining the Society in its eight years of existence, they represent 48% of the losses.

There are several other points of interest arising out of the membership figures:

- (a) Total membership is highest in the areas where the Society has been most active, and this is a self-perpetuating situation. If we exclude overseas members, we are continuing to attract most of our new members from the areas of our activity and many of them are recruited at, or following field meetings. It must be remembered, of course, that two factors would

favour higher membership in the south than in the north—there are more people and activity in developing the newer tropical pastures has been higher. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between north and south is too high.

- (b) The high proportion of farmer members in the areas where field meetings have been held is a clear indication that if the Society wishes to attract more farmers then it must hold more field meetings.
- (c) The fact that membership losses from resignations and terminations are proportionately higher among farmers than among “professionals” again indicates that the Society needs to examine what it is doing for farmers.
- (d) We should not lose sight of the fact that the Society is attracting members from elsewhere in Australia and from overseas. Together they represent 23% of all our members and so their needs must not be ignored. I will not return to this point again, so I would merely repeat that our major service to these members is through TROPICAL GRASSLANDS.

What does all this mean for the future and what can the Society do about it? Some changes in our activities are indicated and without attempting to be exhaustive I would like to suggest three things that can be done. We should hold more field meetings, we should make some changes in the type of field meetings that is held, and we should aim to develop “Members’ Forum” in the Newsletter.

I think it has been quite right for the Society to continue holding field meetings in the areas where most of its members are located, and it will be necessary to continue doing this. The Society cannot neglect its present members for the sake of attracting new members. So that if we are to increase the number of field meetings, and particularly if we are to give them a wider geographical spread, then the Society must form more Sections. The Burnett Section has been quite successful. It has attracted new members and it has certainly made it possible to hold meetings in areas which would be rather difficult to serve from Brisbane. Its activities have been severely restricted in the last two years by drought but this is surely temporary. I was at the inaugural meeting of that Section and there was most obvious enthusiasm for its formation; some people came from 150 miles away. But the impetus for formation of a Section has to come from the area concerned. The Society Committee can urge the formation of Sections but it cannot force them on to unwilling people. Several enthusiasts are needed to start things moving. The duties are not very arduous because under the system operating at present the central committee continues to handle most of the administrative work.

I am sure that an increase in field meetings will not only help to attract and hold farmer members, it will also help to serve the interests of “professional” members. There must be many reasons why people join a Society such as this but I suppose that fundamentally they all come back to a desire to increase knowledge by seeing what the other fellow is doing and having a chance to discuss it with him. And I am quite certain that much of the success of the Society comes from the opportunities for farmers and scientists to meet and talk, not as specialist and general practitioner, but as fellow members. But I do not wish to imply from all this that evening meetings in Brisbane should be eliminated—the farmer can meet the scientist in the laboratory and lecture room just as well as the scientist can meet the farmer in the field.

As far as the format of field meetings is concerned, I think that the new Committee might consider adding to the program by holding some smaller and less formal meetings. These could be something in the nature of “farm walks” where a farmer might agree to be available at an appointed time to show visitors some aspect of his grassland activities, or a research worker might similarly be available at a certain time on his experiment. These meetings could be much more local in

character and I would think that they could be regarded as successful if only a dozen people turned up. I do not suggest for one moment that we give up the kind of field meeting we have had today, these "farm walks" would be supplementary.

"Members' Forum" was started in the Newsletter this year to provide a medium for members to write about their ideas and experiences with pastures. The idea was that many members would hesitate to write a contribution to TROPICAL GRASSLANDS but they might write a "letter to the editor" type of thing for the Newsletter. "Members' Forum" has got off to a slow start but I think, and the outgoing Committee thought also, that it is worth persisting with, because it will greatly increase the opportunities for members to exchange ideas. To get it operating effectively it will probably be necessary to appoint one man to take responsibility and the new Committee might bear this in mind.

In all that I have said so far I have accepted that the Society will continue in much the same form as it has today. But I think that at some time in the future it will have to decide whether it is to remain as a meeting ground for all who are interested in tropical pastures, or whether it will become more of a professional society. I think that pressures and temptations are very likely to develop in that direction. I believe that such a move would be both undesirable and unnecessary. It would be undesirable because I think the strength of our Society lies in the fact that it brings scientist and farmer together as complimentary units in one aspect of the agriculture of this country, and I think it is unnecessary because the scientist already has other opportunities such as in the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science to fill his more specialized needs.

The Society has much to be proud of in its achievements in such a short time, and I have certainly considered it an honour to serve as its President.