



A summing up of the forum: where are we up to and where do we go now? ⁺

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Abstract: A summary of the forum so far, with all-inclusive discussion and development of pointers for the next targets and years of activity and research.

For the last two days I have taken pages and pages of notes on so many fantastic talks. I was beginning to think I knew how to pull all the notes into one great theme ... until today's talks opened even more new ground. So I had to start afresh. In this summary I want to give an overview, not of the facts within each talk but of the thinking and attitudes that lay behind so many of these great presentations.

Passion and pride

I think the first thing that characterises grassland conservationists must be **passion**. There was an extraordinary amount of passion among our speakers. Passion was the key characteristic that brought success in our early work on grasslands in Victoria, in the 1980s and '90s. There was a similar passion back then, as a keen group of people said: 'We can do something with all of this land that has been totally neglected'. There was no public profile for grasslands back then. Grasslands had no identity. So we not only said 'We can start this', but also 'We can create the understanding to show *why* grasslands are worth caring for'. That passion was vitally important. Geoff Robertson's talk (this proceedings) about the history of Friends of Grasslands (FOG) pointed out the great passion that drove their activities and kept FOG going. This forum has reignited that passion among us all in a way we have not seen for a long, long time.

The last two days have been a wonderful opportunity to share that passion and to re-energise ourselves, so we can go back to what is, sometimes, pretty grinding work to care for grassy landscapes. The word 'passion' came up first in the wonderful video that Jasmine Foxlee (this proceedings) showed of the ParkCare groups. Jasmine commented on the amazing amount of passion that volunteers bring in, and how that enlivens the people who work on grasslands every day of the week. And the same passion has been shown by every other presenter. Whatever you might think about 'grass half full', there was nothing 'half full' about passion in any of the talks, nor in the audience during question times and our discussions during the breaks.

The second stand-out attitude is **pride**. There is no shortage of pride about the gains, the achievements, the ways we have worked, and the ways we have overcome some of the losses that have occurred through the last 20 years.

Community and social capital

The third point I noted, which came through really strongly, is the sense of **community**. The successes of FOG and ParkCare in the ACT are amazing achievements. How do you keep a community group going for 25 years? How do you keep up the enthusiasm in groups that are working to inform policy, that go out weeding in terrible weather and all the rest of it? These are extraordinary achievements, and testament to a few things, one of which is '**social capital**'.

Do you ever think about this notion of social capital? Nowhere in Australia has the social capital that you have in the ACT. Social capital is not just about education levels and former jobs. It is about the ability to work together for a common goal; no matter what your differences are, or who is on which side of the policy versus advocacy debate, or whether



people are pushing for production or conservation or whatever else. Throughout the last 20 years, the capacity to work together and keep pushing forward has been really important. It is something you do not see when you are part of it. It is easy to take it for granted.

Achievements and legacy

Next, **achievement**. Achievements in grasslands are always going to be difficult to discuss. We know we are working in an endangered ecosystem. There is nothing we can do in the foreseeable future that will stop grasslands being an endangered ecosystem. The key thing here is that we are so keen to keep on working even though we know we will get more losses. I was amazed to hear about the ACT situation from Michael Mulvaney (this proceedings), and the discussion afterwards in which people clearly did not agree about the number of hectares of grassland you had lost. Regardless of whether 300 ha or 1000 ha have been destroyed, compare that to Melbourne and look at the amount of urban growth in Canberra through this period. You have changed entire suburbs; you have stopped entire suburbs; you have moved entire developments. That is an *outstanding* achievement. In Melbourne we lost much more than that even though we knew the value of grassy landscapes early on. These achievements in ACT come from all those things I have mentioned: social capital, commitment, passion. There are no easy wins in grassland conservation. There never will be. We will continue to suffer losses, but we must never overlook our achievements. If we just focus on our losses, we reduce our social capacity to make bigger gains in the future.

The next point I want to touch on is **legacy**. Most of the speakers have highlighted the people that have been here before us. This was especially so in the presentations by Adrian Brown (this proceedings) and Geoff Simpson (this proceedings) who spoke about the 40,000 years of knowledge we can build on. The legacy of the past 25 years was covered by John Morgan, Sarah Sharp and Sarah Ryan (all in this proceedings). The legacy of knowledge in Melbourne, where I come from, began at La Trobe University and came from the ecologists who preceded us – especially Bob Parsons and Neville Scarlett, who taught John Stuwe, Keith McDougall, John Morgan, me, and any other name you know from the 1980s and early 1990s. From that line of teaching, we now have Nathan Wong (this proceedings), a former student of John Morgan's. We can see a similar situation in ACT, through your universities, through CSIRO (an extraordinary institution that has given you an amazing amount of capacity-building, knowledge and input), and through other educational units, government organisations and NGOs. The value of that legacy is huge.

Consider how much we have learnt in those 20–25 years. John Morgan's talk (this proceedings) made me realise how much knowledge we now take for granted. You all know that biomass reduction is important. It is 'obvious'. But when we started work no-one accepted that as fact. When we talked about biomass the reaction was: 'How do you know these small remnants are viable?' 'Why do we need to do anything?' 'If we need to do anything what is the point of it?' 'It's not natural.' Now, we still have challenges with resourcing and management, but no-one is quibbling about biomass-reduction in policy, in practice, or in grassland extension. Another example came up in Graham Fifield's presentation (this proceedings). What is the first thing Graham did in his project? He got a soil test done; he looked at the nutrient status of the site, and made management decisions based on that data. Twenty years ago, no-one looked at nutrient status as a starting point for conservation management.

Learning by doing and inventing

The next point that carried through lots of talks is **learning by doing**. We heard Shaun McKiernan's talk (see McKiernan & Gill submitted) about the graziers in the Bega area, and how they learned to manage African Lovegrass in their pastures, by doing things. As a result they have inculcated a great way of thinking and learning about pasture and weed management. Adrian Brown (this proceedings) gave us a similar lesson. Adrian's and Shaun's talks are practical examples of exactly the same thing: that is, we learn by doing. Think again about Graham Fifield's talk: numerous scientific papers could have told us that soil nutrients would



differ between the land under native grassland and land under weeds, but that is not the point. The point is that you do not really internalise all that until you take that first soil sample and see the results. Then you see: 'Wow, it's different; the nutrients are low over *here* and really high over *there*. There are native species *here* and weeds over *there*'. Everything clicks.

'Learning by doing' in these presentations has been characterised by **inventiveness**. I noted a few examples. Look at the weird and wacky methods people are using to catch and monitor grassland animals. We grab some poly pipe from a plumbing shop, stick it in the ground and we catch dragons! We use roofing tiles to attract legless lizards. How do you invent something as wacky as that? So many talks have demonstrated this wonderful capacity to start from nowhere and say, 'This is where we want to get to; let's not get stuck in "boxes"'. Instead let's work out how we can get to where we want to be, really well'.

It is easy to romanticise inventiveness from a grazier's perspective and a field worker's perspective, but I was much taken by the inventiveness of the policy-makers. Sarah Sharp's presentation (this proceedings) began with the early statement from James Ross that what we needed in grasslands was more reserves. In other presentations we have heard about reserves, memoranda of understanding, contracts, leases, leaseholds – a huge array of ways to protect grassy landscapes, no matter what the political dimensions. Our community groups and policy-makers have come up with '50 ways to care' for grasslands using a huge array of legal and non-legal approaches. That is an amazing outcome. Never under-estimate the inventiveness of a conservation policy-maker.

Tensions and silence

Next, **tensions**. Tensions have existed in grassland conservation since Day 1. What is our vision? Which way do we look: forward or back? Do we base our work on historical composition or do we want to work towards functional grasslands for the future?

There was a great talk yesterday about grazing management (Massy, this proceedings). Everyone wants shrubs because shrubs are functional; they are really important; they really contribute to the Earth, and so on – but they were not there originally. It is a great example of the tension between historicism and creating a functional future. Are we looking at maintaining this as a remnant system, or do we want to create ecosystems that function in a particular way, regardless of what they were like originally? These underlying tensions have always been there. They bubble under the surface, and become points for people to discuss over lots of red wine.

I think there is a big gap between debating the tensions, on the one hand, and seeing where different approaches fit, on the other hand. We do not have one approach to grassland conservation. We have a zillion purpose-built approaches and we always will have. Sue McIntyre's presentation (this proceedings) highlighted the diversity of species and challenges on her property and in a reserve. There is no single approach that can deal with that range of situations.

Another aspect I found really interesting is our '**silence**' – the things we do not talk about. Climate change is the obvious topic. I remember a big conference in Melbourne in 1992, where Roger Jones (of CSIRO), who has been a grassland advocate for a long time, got up and spoke about climate change. As an audience we agreed that, yes, climate is really important, and it is variable, and so is the soil, and the grassland animals are important too – yes, they all matter. But there was no reality check on what climate change would mean for us. It was perhaps 15 years before climate change started really to enter our consciousness. Here we are, over two decades later, and how much has climate change been part of the talks at this forum? Really, only in Catherine Ross's talk (this proceedings) in which we have heard about losing Manna Gums from an entire region. We are told we can expect a 2–4°C rise in average temperature by the end of the century, and yet Catherine's observations are based on a rise of about 0.6°C. I am curious about why there is this silence about climate change. Partly, I think, the reason is the massive sense of intimidation we get from the issue. How are we going to deal with it? But is there also a kind of underlying denialism? Or, if not denialism, at



least cognitive dissonance? We know climate change is very important politically in terms of current emissions, but do we all actually believe it will have a big impact on our favourite sites? Or would we rather imagine it won't, or not even think about it? Our challenge is to work out how to build what we know about climate change into the work we do, while still working forwards with lots of positivity. Silence is not a strategy.

The future

And now we come to the **future**. I want to ask you all a simple question, so please put up your hands ... how many people here are under 40? Wow, you all sit up the back! You all must have good eyesight. From my daughter's perspective you folks up the back are all 'pretty old' and the rest of us down the front are 'really old'. When we oldies started in grassland conservation in the 1980s and '90s, those of us who are here today were younger than most of the people up the back. There were others who were older again who carried the torch to us – such as the Victorian National Parks Association, the Conservation Council of Victoria, Parks Victoria and others in Victoria.

In another 20 years, there will be another conference on grasslands, and hardly anyone in the front half of the room will be there. You at the back will be 'it'. The future of grasslands on the ground, the future of grasslands in your heads; the way you think about grasslands, the way you publicise grasslands, the way you spruik grasslands, the way you actually create grasslands – the people up the back will make that future.

In the ACT, Friends of Grasslands Inc. (FOG) is carrying the torch at the moment, and will go on doing that for as long as they have members. But the future will be different. What will be the issues? What will be the silences? What things will change? The way we think of the future now is not the same way as we thought about the future years ago when I started. If this is your first conference on grasslands, this is the starting point. The situation now, such as we have heard in the papers of this forum, is your benchmark, your starting point.

Think of that wonderful old painting in the presentation by Josh Dorrrough (this proceedings). It shows dynamism, it shows so many possibilities, does it not? ... Really, it is just an old picture. All the things we 'see' in that old painting are extensions of our visions for the future. The sense of dynamism and possibility – that is all in our heads, not in the picture. In the 1980s, grassland conservationists would have seen different visions in that picture; not better or worse, just different. And those of you up the back who look at that picture in 20 years' time will see something different again. There is no static vision; we create it as we work. Sarah Ryan pointed that out (this proceedings). It is just like biomass removal really. We keep grasslands alive – on the ground and in our hearts – through constant renewal.

We have a sense of community, a sense of engagement, a sense of achievement and pride in what we have done so far. And I hope grassland people keep those characteristics in the coming years. You will need them; there are going to be bad patches, like there were before. Some of you will be here again in 20 years' time, and some poor person who is now sitting up the back will have the job of giving a wrap-up about everything that you have done, in and for the grasslands, that you can all be super-proud of. Please enjoy that journey, enjoy that moment, and until then, create the grasslands that you want for your future.

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'Grass half full or grass half empty? Valuing native grassy landscapes'

Friends of Grasslands' forum 30 October – 1 November 2014

Friends of Grasslands Inc. (www.fog.org.au) supporting native grassy landscapes

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* This record of the talk given at the forum has been checked by the presenter, but not peer-reviewed. To find out more, contact the presenter, via their institution or by email to: info@fog.org.au.