



Lessons learnt by Friends of Grasslands +

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Abstract: Friends of Grasslands (FOG) was formed 20 years ago to support natural temperate grasslands and, later and more broadly, natural temperate grassy ecosystems. It is celebrating its 20th birthday by writing its history, tracing its formation and the context in which it continues to exist. FOG is primarily an advocacy group encouraging its members, landowners and land managers, government and decision makers and the broader community to understand the importance of grassy ecosystems and their flora and fauna, what is needed to protect, conserve, manage and restore grasslands, and how that can be achieved. The history will describe how FOG communicates, educates (through major and mini workshops, field trips and presentations), performs its on-ground work (restoring grasslands and teaching skills), lobbies, and partners with friends and sometimes unlikely allies to achieve its objectives. FOG has paid particular attention to its governance structures and member training. The history will conclude by summarising lessons learnt and their implications for the future.

Friends of Grasslands was formed 20 years ago to support Natural Temperate Grasslands and, later and more broadly, natural temperate grassy ecosystems. It is celebrating its 20th birthday by writing its history. This is not an easy task as we have found that trying to compact 20 years of experience into a small volume is a very difficult exercise.



This presentation draws out some of the themes that come through that history, with the hope of stimulating our collective thinking:

- FOG has been a collective effort and has had an impressive performance,
- how FOG arose and what sustains it,
- the guiding role of science and adaptive management,
- the tools and resources that are an important part of the success story,
- the values that guide us, and
- how we can unlock our potential.

The photo above is a favourite, a snapshot of one of our many working bees at Old Cooma Common Grassland Reserve.

An impressive performance

The table on the next page sums up FOG's performance. It shows FOG's various activities and for each category the number of events (such as conferences, field trips, working bees), the number of participants, the number of volunteer hours and the estimated value of such activities. To summarise, the table shows that in its first 20 years FOG organised 857 events, at which 7310 people attended, involving almost 67,000 hours and valued at almost \$2 million. A truly impressive performance.



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	Number of events	Number of attendees	Number of hours	Value
Conferences, forums & workshops	49	1,887	13,700	\$411,000.00
Field trips	153	2,329	18,500	\$555,000.00
Working bees	79	890	5,350	\$160,500.00
Other meetings (excl committee), displays, presentations, garden visits	134	2,204	6,147	\$184,410.00
Newsletters	110	-	8,800	\$264,000.00
Submissions	332	-	5,312	\$159,360.00
Governance	-	-	8,000	\$240,000.00
Total	857	7,310	65,809	\$1,974,270.00

Why are we here?

The history will survey the reasons why FOG came into being and what its objectives were. As Sarah Sharp mentioned in her presentation (this proceedings) there was a strong focus on grasslands in the early 1990s.

Scientific and conservation interest in grasslands was building momentum especially in Canberra and Victoria by the early 1990s. Important players were the National Parks Association, World Wide Fund for Nature and several researchers. In Canberra, the Conservation Council held a grassland workshop in 1991. The Commonwealth funded the ACT Region Grassland Recovery Team which employed Sarah Sharp. It also funded other grassland initiatives. A second Canberra Grassland Conference was held in 1993. The Recovery Team and Society for Growing Australian Plants conceived FOG, and FOG was launched in November 1994. FOG had a remarkable first president Edwina Barton (photo at right) and committee and supporters. In that first year, it started as it would continue: lobbying, newsletter, on-ground work, field trips and workshops. When FOG faltered in late 1997, many rallied around and the framework established then has existed since.



Science and adaptive management

During its short history, FOG has witnessed a tremendous increase in understanding the science surrounding grassy ecosystems and how to manage these important remnants, best summed up in the term 'adaptive management'.

Important developments have been: the mapping of grasslands (showing their extent in 1788 and now), using science to obtain better urban planning development and conservation outcomes; improving the understanding of the synergies between production and conservation; successfully including community enthusiasts and landholders in grassland management (the photo here is an example of FOG's monitoring work at 'Scottsdale', near Bredbo NSW); ongoing vegetation, plant and fauna research and building up inventories of information; the





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strengthening of advocacy through including evidence-based science; increasing knowledge of the horticulture of local indigenous grasses and forbs and the increasing practice of growing them in home gardens; greatly increased knowledge of weeding and grassland management; the initiation of bold steps in grassland restoration ecology and monitoring (as I read many years ago, 'a true understanding of grasslands and their functionality is gained by restoring them'); captive breeding and release programs of grassland plants and animals; adoption of traditional land management practices; and citizen science. Each of these issues has been the subject of numerous conferences and workshops.

Tools and resources

FOG has many tools and resources to draw upon, including communication, education, on-ground work, advocacy, networking, governance and finance.

Communication

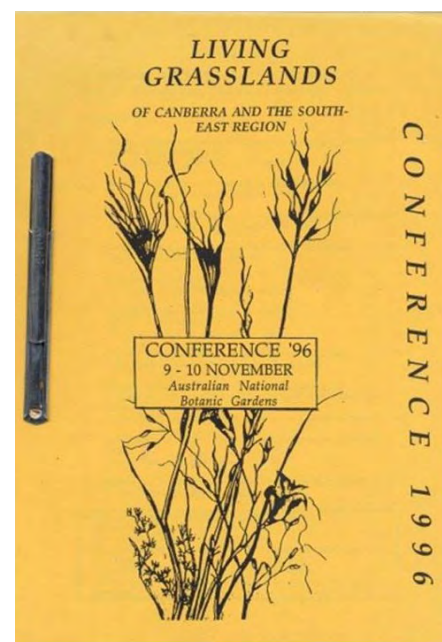
There are a number of communication channels through which FOG operates. Much of the communication is one-to-one and in a group setting. The newsletter to members is an important way to tell success stories, thank and recognise people, inform readers of scientific and management developments, build communities, recruit members, clarify messages, explore ideas, and record FOG history. Not infrequently FOG appears in public media, especially newsprint and radio, as well as newsletters of other groups, to spread key messages and engage the broader community. The FOG website gets an incredible number of hits and many people find it useful. FOG also gets numerous inquiries from researchers and helps them on their way. The book *Grassland Flora*, which FOG promotes, is a key tool in FOG's work, and to date many thousands of copies have been sold. It is one of many publications and brochures that FOG has produced and/or distributed. The photo here shows the fourth newsletter produced.

Education

FOG held five major conferences in its early days, but abandoned this medium when many other groups entered the field. However, it continued small workshops and has held 46 in its first 20 years. These have aimed to reach out to the community, explore new knowledge and ideas, or to provide training and skills. They have covered every aspect of FOG's interests and efforts. Apart from more formal workshops, FOG has organised many presentations (winter slide afternoons have proved popular) or given presentations at conferences, workshops or special events organised by other groups. All this has imparted knowledge and helped to build the grassy community.

Education also takes place through field trips. These have been an excellent and mutual way to learn about the reality of grasslands, grassland management and Indigenous and farming practices. Visits to members' properties and places of interest have greatly increased members' knowledge and ability to manage important remnants.

The photo here shows the proceedings of FOG's first conference.





On-ground work

One important lesson that has been learnt is that our grasslands and woodlands if left unmanaged deteriorate quickly and hence they need intensive management if we are to conserve them. Hence our on-ground work primarily focuses on conserving and restoring our grassy ecosystems. However, it offers many more benefits: it validates FOG (puts its hands where its mouth is) and allows it to learn the reality of grassland conservation; provides an invaluable way to learn skills; facilitates productive citizen science (e.g. FOG's Golden Sun Moth surveys, reptile surveys and Scottsdale monitoring); shows stakeholders and the community what needs to be done; and is creating copycats.

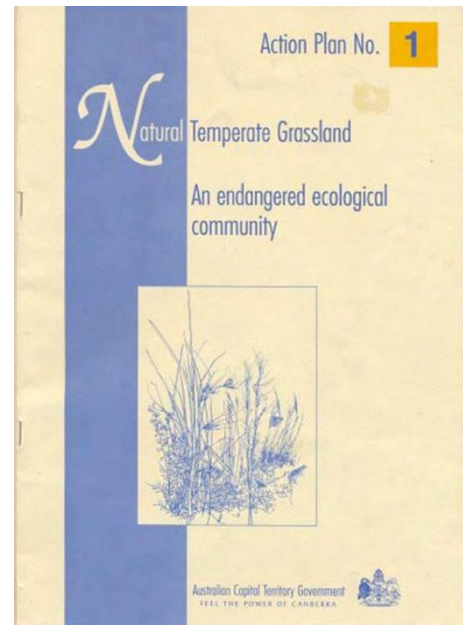
The photo here shows volunteers using spray equipment at Old Cooma Common.



Advocacy (lobbying)

FOG primarily is an advocacy group and everything it does has an element of campaigning or advocacy. An important value in FOG's constitution is respect for the values of others and hence in its advocacy work it is non-confrontational. This can often be achieved by focusing on the scientific evidence. Martin Luther King's saying 'Tough minded, tender hearted' is a theme of FOG's work.

FOG has always had an advocacy officer, although often this was an informal role. Today it has an advocacy group which focuses on formal submissions – well over 300 submissions have been submitted in the first 20 years. FOG is also often sounded out, asked for advice informally, and invited to sit on committees. Within FOG and its networks there is a rich and informed source of knowledge. Workshops are often held to work out objectives and strategies. From time to time FOG has run hard campaigns, such as at Conder and East O'Malley. The photo (right) shows the ACT Government's *Action Plan No. 1*. FOG made important contributions to its development and to most of the subsequent Actions Plans.



Networking

FOG is one of many groups involved in supporting grassy ecosystems. Partly FOG may take some credit for this situation. A key element of its approach has been to seek partners and to influence and learn from others, or to pool or gain resources. This forum is clear evidence of our networking.

The photo (right) shows on-ground work at Stirling Park, ACT. What it does not demonstrate is that this project is successful as a result of highly successful networking.





Governance and finance

One reason for FOG's success is the effort it has put into developing its governance and financial structures. Governance and finance are the foundation of any organisation but if not well designed and attended to will lead to destruction. Too often the importance of good governance is underestimated. Without going into its intricacies, I would recommend reading *Book of the Board* (Fishel 2014).

Volunteers

We live in a world in which the work of volunteers is becoming better recognised. Large numbers of adult Australians undertake voluntary work. In fact in any one year something like 6000 people in Canberra undertake voluntary work on the environment. Volunteers are the chief source of philanthropy, giving their time, resources and money to environmental causes. We should continue to focus on assisting people to become volunteers, to understand their values and goals, and to build up their skills and resources.

Volunteering is a social obligation. We are all busy with life, kids, jobs and so on, but everyone has a responsibility to our society, particularly as governments are providing less and less. Unless we all pitch in to help, restoration and good grassland management will not happen. Volunteering is also a way to self-realisation because through community groups one can be trained and gain self- and social-respect.

Values and unlocking our potential

We value grasslands and grassy ecosystems, but I think we share many deep values and we need to explore these a little. I would suggest that we share a passion for science which is about understanding nature so that we can live successfully within it. We likely share values about economic wellbeing. Every day we hear about economic growth and I think economic growth is a fantastic goal. We need to raise the wellbeing of every citizen of the world. However, economic growth that destroys the planet is unacceptable. Economic growth can take many positive forms. With careful thought, we should be able to create a future in which the climate, natural ecological function, and rare and even extinct species are restored. We should be able to bring back our landscapes to something like the past landscapes that Josh Dorrrough showed us in his presentation (this proceedings), while allowing for suitable agricultural and urban development within that context.

These values are not inconsistent with the values of our First Australians. In fact their values have much to teach us about the environment and the use of resources, land management and being part of a community.

Lessons learnt and the future

We have been fortunate to live through the last 20 years and to have shared the learning experience. We have acquired much knowledge and many skills. Now we have a new opportunity to move forward. What we do now will create our future.

Further reading

Dorrrough J. (2015) African Lovegrass and endangered grassy ecosystems on private land – trends and risks. In: *Grass half full or grass half empty? Valuing native grassy landscapes*. Proceedings of the Friends of Grasslands 20th anniversary forum, 30 October – 1 November 2014, Canberra, Australia. Eds: A. Milligan & H. Horton. Friends of Grasslands Inc.

Fishel D. (2014) *The Book of the Board: Effective Governance for Non-profit Organisations*. 3rd edition. The Federation Press. ISBN 9781862879577



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Sharp S. (2015) What has changed in twenty years of grassy landscape conservation? In: *Grass half full or grass half empty? Valuing native grassy landscapes*. Proceedings of the Friends of Grasslands 20th anniversary forum, 30 October – 1 November 2014, Canberra, Australia. Eds: A. Milligan & H. Horton. Friends of Grasslands Inc.

Geoff Robertson is a former economic and social statistician who with his partner owns 'Garuwanga' which they manage for conservation. Geoff has been active in many conservation groups in the Canberra region and is a former president of Friends of Grasslands, the Conservation Council and Kosciuszko to Coast. He has focused his energies on learning about grassy ecosystems and has played a key advocacy and organising role.

+ 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.