

Living grasslands - FOG conference '96
Closing summary : Where to from here ?
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Stocktake : where we are now

Lowland native grasslands are still Australia's most endangered ecosystems, with a mere 0.5 % remaining of what existed when Europeans arrived on this continent - perhaps even less than 0.5 %, given what we have heard over the last two days.

Jamie Kirkpatrick has told us not only that clearance of lowland grasslands is still continuing, but that clearance over the next 10-15 years will dwarf present clearance unless we can get conservation orders and purchases of grasslands in place. Private land is the key, says Jamie.

We heard from Clive Thomas that pressure on remnant native vegetation is increasing, not decreasing. With the decline of the wool industry and falling farm incomes, private landholders are searching for ways to extract more dollars from their land. As a result, native vegetation is being cleared to make way for crops such as canola. Rice and cotton - primarily for export - are replacing native grasslands. And do not presume that in NSW SEPP 46 has stopped clearing - it has not, warns Clive.

Indeed John Benson's account of how the recent ploughing up of a high conservation grassland in the Monaro region of NSW was deemed to be legal under SEPP 46 because the land had supposedly been chisel-ploughed ten years prior illustrates that graphically. Like Clive, John sees expansion of export crops like rice and cotton as a key threat to grasslands, reporting that our Riverina grasslands are being destroyed by rice expansion.

There are a few notes of hope. Jamie says that lowland grassland ecosystems are resilient - they can reinvade if ploughing ceases - and John Benson reports that the value of native grasslands, particularly in drought, is being increasingly recognised. Leon Horsnell and Mike Snoad are responding creatively to increased public demand for landscaping and regeneration using grassland species, indicating that empathy with grasslands is building.

But Sandie Jones has warned us that for grassland animals, reinvansion is not so easy. Compared to plants, grassland animals require larger areas and a wider range of different habitats to survive. Sandie reports on the dramatic decline, even over the last 20 years, of grassland animals like the Plains Wanderer, Eastern Barred Bandicoot and Southern Lined Earless Dragon. The fact that, right here in the Canberra region, *all* of the Southern Lined Earless Dragon sites are now threatened by urban development is a damning indictment of our failure as a society to protect grasslands from human impact.

And when thinking of grassland animals, we should never forget the vital role played by invertebrates, as Kim Pullen has outlined, and of the appalling decline of grassland insects like the Golden Sun Moth.

As if the threat of clearing to make way for agricultural and urban expansion were not enough - threats which Ian Gerrard fully acknowledges - we have heard from speakers like Colin Hocking and Jules Bross that invasion by exotic weeds like Chilean Needle Grass and African Love Grass probably pose as great a threat to lowland grasslands as does clearing.

Where to from here ?

What, then, are the key challenges ahead for those of us in the community who care about lowland native grasslands ?

Firstly, we must understand and learn how to combat the major economic forces at work against grasslands.

Ian Gerrard warns that unless there can be economic sustainability for landholders, grasslands will not be preserved. Jamie Kirkpatrick says that we need economic incentives *and* legal protection for grasslands - that neither alone is adequate.

If rural landholders were paid for conservation outcomes - paid at a level that created real economic incentives, as is done in Europe - then many landholders would preserve their grasslands, says Jamie. But tough laws are needed for the minority of landholders who would not respond to economic arguments.

So as a society we need to be willing to demand tough laws banning damage to grasslands and to be willing to pay for grassland conservation - whether that is to purchase grasslands outright, or to pay landholders to manage them for conservation outcomes. And we need to tell our politicians that we are willing to pay whatever it takes, that grasslands are simply too precious to lose.

Secondly, we need to take a stand, to state loudly and unequivocally that, as Clive puts it, 'We're here for native grasslands, we'll fight for them'. In practice this means letting our politicians and bureaucrats and opinion leaders know that if grasslands get a raw deal, they'll be hearing from us - individually and collectively. In other words, we need to signal in no uncertain terms that grasslands have political clout.

Thirdly, we need to learn about grasslands - through Friends of Grasslands or by attending short courses such as Isobel Crawford and others run through the continuing education system - and to look out for remnants wherever we go. As Jamie says, when visiting rural friends look out for that undiscovered grassland remnant that may be lurking in the back paddock. In other words, be a remnant watchdog.

Fourthly, we can help on-ground by volunteering our time to help with regeneration and supplementation of existing remnants, including weed removal.

Finally, we must support our grassland professionals. Grassland scientists like Reiner Rehwinkel and others working full-time to help grasslands face many difficulties, including having to be world-class diplomats, psychologists and strategists in their coal-face dealings with landholders, land managers and developers for whom grassland conservation is not necessarily a priority.

Their job is a tough and frustrating one, and those of us whose involvement with grasslands is only occasional can hardly imagine what courage and dedication it must take to go on fighting for an ecosystem type that - despite their best efforts - is disappearing before their eyes.

We must let our grassland professionals know that we support and applaud their work. We must demand of our governments that their work is properly funded and that - whatever amount of taxpayers' funds it takes - the destruction of lowland native grasslands is brought to a screeching halt.

As a nation that claims to be environmentally responsible, and that has signed international treaties guaranteeing the conservation of Australian biodiversity, we can do no less.