New Zealand Society of Animal Production – The Past 25 Years

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At the 50th Jubilee Conference of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production in 1990, Professor Ian Coop charted the first 50 years of the Society from its inception in 1941 (Coop, 1991). Some Presidents (like Morrow, 2004) have described the Society’s activities for a particular period in detail. The objective of this brief communication is to identify some of the highlights and trends during the past 25 years. Although this review was commissioned by the Management Committee it may contain some personal comments which do not reflect those of the Management Committee.

Aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of the Society have not changed over the years and are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 The aims and objectives of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production (Inc.)

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<th>Aims and objectives</th>
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<td>To provide an organisation to bring about active collaboration among those involved in the science of producing food, fibre and other products from animals.</td>
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<td>To provide an annual meeting for members which will encourage both inter- and intra-disciplinary exchange and discussion of findings.</td>
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<td>To assist young people in a manner that develops an interest in the science of food and fibre production.</td>
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<td>To provide visions for the future of animal production in New Zealand.</td>
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<td>To promote the value of science in the development of animal production.</td>
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<td>To take such actions as may be deemed necessary to foster improvement in animal production.</td>
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This is not the place to critically review whether the Society has met these objectives over the past 25 years. In their Annual Report to the Annual General Meeting, Presidents frequently, and generally favourably, assess the Society’s activities against this checklist. Professor Coop noted that the Society was not a professional or political body but mused as to whether the Society should aim, for ‘a higher profile as a group to exert direct influence in research policy, funding and animal production policy’. This cudgel has not been picked up by Management Committees since then and the Society has ‘stuck to its knitting’ as defined in the aims and objectives. It is doubtful whether the Society has had the clout to achieve a higher public profile, but in the age of poor public perception of the welfare and environmental impact of animal production there may be a case for this to be revisited.

Membership

In her 2003 Presidential Address, Catherine Morrow showed the trend in membership numbers over the years and her record has been adapted to reflect the last 25 years (Figure 1). Membership has steadily declined from 1991 to 2015. A component of this decline is a more rigorous policy of excluding passengers who are not paid-up members but also likely reflects the decline in the number of people involved in New Zealand animal-production research and extension. In fact the decline in NZSAP membership since 1991 of 24% is less than the decline of around 32% in AgResearch staff (Edmeades, 2015) over a similar period. However, the present membership of 418 is sufficient to sustain a vibrant Society.

Figure 1 The trend in number of NZSAP members and papers in the annual Proceedings from 1991-2015.

It is interesting that the proportion of members attending the Annual Conference has never been greater than about 30% of the total membership. When questioned about this, non-conference attendees have responded that they are satisfied with receiving the Proceedings and other NZSAP publications.

The mix of membership vocations and genders has not been checked for this review but has been periodically documented. It is known to consist of animal scientists and their support staff, consultants, veterinarians and farmers. In his 2007 Presidential address (Scobie, 2007), David Scobie bemoaned the lack of gender balance in the Society. Although this may not have changed much at the senior level of the Society management (there have been only two female Presidents of the Society in the last 25 years), there have been 15 female winners of the Young Member Award in the past 25 years. This is surely an indication of a trend that we can expect to see more female executives soon. Interestingly, the Young Member Award is not a Society initiative of the last 25 years. The first award was made in 1985.
Society Officer Bearers

NZSAP is administered by a Management Committee (around 10) of elected, appointed and co-opted members. Up until 1998 not all of the Management Committee were allocated specific roles. Under the Presidency of Dorian Garrick in 1998 all Management Committee members were committed to a specified role as set out in a set of Guidelines. The only paid position is that of the Executive Secretary and latterly the Editor was a contractual position for a few years.

Presidents come-and-go on an annual basis although they serve their probation as Vice- and give continuity as Past-presidents, but Editors and Executive Secretaries endure. Apart from cameo appearances as Editor of Althea Parry (2 years), David Cottle (1 year) and Graham Barrell (1 year), three Editors, Denis Elvidge, Roland Sumner and Sam Peterson have carried the editorial can for 9, 6 and 6 years respectively. The mother-daughter combo of Lynne Smith and Jane Kay held the Executive Secretary position for 15 consecutive years. If John Smith’s contribution to the Society of 6 years as Treasurer and author/co-author of more papers than any other member to date, then the past 25 years might well be dubbed ‘The Smith Era’. In addition to these stalwarts, over 40 other members of the Society have held nominated positions in the Management team in the last 25 years.

The Society’s Finances

The net assets of NZSAP have increased over the past 25 years from around $220,000 to a current figure of $638,000 representing a compounded increase of around 4.5% per annum.

The increase is the result of judicious management of existing funds (including the existing Animal Science Fund) by succeeding Treasurers plus significant donations to the Society in the form of:

AgResearch Animal Genomics International Travel Fund

In 2004, AgResearch’s Animal Genomics Platform provided a donation of $150,000. Intellectual property was sold by AgResearch to Ovita and the money donated to NZSAP represented the Animal Genomics share from that sale. It was the desire of Animal Genomics to ensure that this money would provide an enduring benefit by providing travel grants.

Ruminant Research Symposium Travel Award Fund

In 2008, when the Enhanced Animal Research Society Inc was formally dissolved, EARS donated the balance of their equity ($45,452.85) to the New Zealand Society of Animal Production, to be administered as the Ruminant Reproduction Symposium Travel Award. The objectives of the Award are to support scientific personnel in New Zealand to maintain an international presence in ruminant reproduction science. In particular, the award is intended to support travel to attend the International Ruminant Reproduction Symposium held every four years.

Murray Woolford Young Agricultural Scientist Award

In 2012, the Murray Woolford Trust and associated parties donated $25,085 to the New Zealand Society of Animal Production to be administered as the Murray Woolford Young Agricultural Scientist Award. The objectives of the award are to fund travel for young scientists to help develop their career for the benefit of the New Zealand dairy industry.

Sales of most of the Occasional Publications have also helped to fill the coffers and some years the Annual Conference organisers record a small surplus which also contributes to the strong financial position of the Society. These substantial reserves make for a benevolent society. In the last 25 years, close to $300,000 has been distributed to members by way of travel grants and other support.

Annual Conference and its Proceedings

The most important activity of the Society is the Annual Conference and its Proceedings which have continued unabated over the period, albeit with a change in calendar position from February (up to 1997) to June, mainly as a response to heavy workloads of scientist preparing research grant applications early in the year and a better fit with university semester dates. That year also marked the change from post-conference to pre-conference publication of the Proceedings.

The Conference has continued to be hosted in rotation by members and their institutions in the four main centres (Hamilton, Palmerston North, Lincoln and Dunedin) but additional venues have been added firstly in Queenzstown in 2003 followed by Napier and Wanaka and Invercargill. These alternate venues have been embraced by members, but inclement weather (e.g., heavy snow) significantly disrupted departure plans from Wanaka in 2007 but it resulted in a Conference first - a trivia quiz which has subsequently become a mainstay feature of the Conference programme.

The number of papers presented at the Conference has declined from a peak in 1998 but may have stabilised at the lower level over the last few years (Figure 1). This decline has been due to fewer papers being submitted rather than more papers being rejected. The Management Committee has historically erred on the generous side in accepting submissions. No formal investigation has been made to explain the decline in the number of papers but it reflects not only the decline in membership and the number of New Zealand animal scientists and their funding but also a desire to publish elsewhere. The ratio of number of members per paper has increased from 5.7:1 to 7.3:1.

To maintain the standard of papers published in the Proceedings a peer-review system was introduced around 1998 with one reviewer per paper. In 2000 the number of reviewers was increased to two per manuscript, with each reviewer acting independently of the other. Coordination of the reviewing process is a major undertaking for the Editor.
A closer relationship between NZSAP and the Australian Society of Animal Production (ASAP) saw the first joint Conference held in Brisbane in 2008. It was very successful. The reciprocal at Lincoln in 2012 was disrupted to some extent by the earthquakes and registered fewer Australians at Lincoln than New Zealanders in Brisbane. Joint Conferences are provisionally scheduled to be held every four years with the next one in Adelaide in 2016.

Status of the Proceedings

The status of the Proceedings as a ‘scientific’ publication has vexed the Society’s Management Committee regularly over the past 25 years. The Proceedings fall short of full journal status. Should there be ‘New Zealand Animal Production’? Our Proceedings are well cited and superior to many other ‘Proceedings’ but papers published in our Proceedings do not ‘score’ highly as publications. Despite the debate over the years Management Committees have stuck with the tried and true ‘Proceedings of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production’.

There are two trends in the Proceeding over the last 25 years which are unlikely to enhance its publication status. The first is the insidious increase in the number of authors per paper. Figure 2 shows the trend in the number of papers with greater than four authors which has now reached 45%. We may know the reason for this, (the publish or perish mantra) but can more than four authors honestly make a ‘significant’ contribution to a four-page paper? Indeed when refereeing some submissions, you have to wonder if some of the authors ever read the draft. The Society would do itself and the scientific literature a good turn by seriously questioning the need for more than four authors per paper.

Figure 2 The increase in number of papers in the annual Proceedings from 1991-2014 with more than 4 authors.

The second disturbing trend in the proceedings is the recent rapid increase in brief communications (Figure 3). Brief communications often leave the reader frustrated by the lack of experimental detail and discussion and are little better than a one-page summary. Again the reasons for submitting a brief communication may be valid (the wish to publish the material elsewhere) but they do not enhance the Proceedings or the Society’s reputation. The recent lifting of the copyright by NZSAP on papers in the Proceedings may help to stem this undesirable trend.

Figure 3 The percentage of papers in the annual Proceedings from 1991-2014 as Brief Communications.

Contract sessions and the LIC/Landcorp Lecture

Contract sessions were introduced to the Conference programme more than 25 years ago and have featured in most Conferences since then. The annual sponsorship by Livestock Improvement Corporation from 1996-2003 and subsequently, to date by Landcorp Farming Ltd of a keynote speaker has given the opportunity to enhance Contract sessions with an overseas or local invited speaker in alternate years.

Proceedings and Conference Content

The subject matter of the Conference and Proceedings has moved with the times. The development of bio-technology and genomic techniques have expanded horizons, although presenters of such papers need to be careful not to lose members who are less familiar with these areas and the jargon. There is still a significant proportion of traditional animal production papers, particularly with sheep. Some of these may appear to reinvent the wheel somewhat or dot ‘i’ s and cross ‘t’ s but the argument that the production systems and the animals they feature are different to those more than 25 years ago has some validity.

One benefit of the reduction in number of papers being presented at the Conference is the lessened need for ‘Concurrent Sessions’ which were a feature of the large meetings of the late 1990s. Concurrent sessions make it more difficult for members to use the Conference as a means of updating across a broad front of animal science which has been a traditional strength of the Society’s meetings.

Perhaps another benefit of the reduction in number of research papers, has been the scope to accept or invite (for example, the recent introduction of the ‘Living Legend’ presentation in 2011) and other review papers, which have historically not been a strong feature of the Proceedings.
Occasional Publications
The production of Occasional Publications in areas of animal production where there was a perceived need for an independent, robust review or recollections has continued to be an important features of the last 25 years at an average publication rate of one per five years which has seen the publication of:
1994 #13 Labcoats to Gumboots, edited by G Davis
1998 #12 Reproductive Management of Grazing Ruminants in New Zealand, edited by ED Fielden & JF Smith
2007 #14: Pasture and Supplements for Grazing Animals, edited by PV Rattray, IM Brookes & AM Nicol
2009 #15 Managing Mineral Deficiencies in Grazing Livestock, by Neville Grace, Scott Knowles & Andrew Sykes
2013 #16 Animal Welfare in New Zealand, by KJ Stafford

The production of such publications is becoming somewhat more difficult due to the need for potential authors to justify all of their time to their employer or account in dollar terms for work outside their main activity.

Digital Age
The Society has embraced technology changes. For most Management Committee meetings, conference calls have replaced face-to-face meetings since 1992. The Society’s website was set up in 1998, continues to be developed, and is now a source of all Society information. A compact disc (CD) of the content of the first 60 Proceedings was produced in 2000. Word-processing developments have helped streamline refereeing and type-setting and the ubiquitous Powerpoint has become the norm for Conference presentations. Requests for cell-phone switching to silent mode have to be made by Session chairs.

Conclusions
Would the founding fathers of NZSAP of 1941 be satisfied by the trends and highlights of the past 25 years?

It is difficult in assessing these changes in the Society’s membership, the content of its Proceedings and its general contribution to New Zealand animal production over the last 25 years, to decide to what extent NZSAP has been proactive in making change or merely responding to ‘societal’ change over which it has no control. There has certainly been no lack of the latter. The contestable model for research funds has channelled research into ‘trendy’ science and ‘outputs’ resulting in ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in various animal science disciplines which has impacted on NZSAP membership and the content and type of NSAP papers. For a period in the 1990s and early 2000s some suggested that primary production was ‘a sunset industry’ with little future. The decline in NZSAP membership may well have reflected this. A downturn in University student enrolments in Agricultural Science courses was also seen during this period, although this has been reversed in the last year or two.

Whether by design or default, NZSAP has changed and adapted during the last 25 years so as to continue to maintain a viable scientific Society with respect to its financial foundation, its Conferences and its publications and for that the founding fathers might nod their heads.

Acknowledgement
I am proud and privileged to have been part of NZSAP in various roles during the past 25 years for which I thank the Society and its members. I have enjoyed the camaraderie. I wish the Society well for the next 25 years. I acknowledge the detailed referring of Roland Sumner and Thomas Lopdell for the up-to-date information on the Award funds.

References