

The Great Plains Crash

Proceedings of A Conference on the Grasslands and Grassy Woodlands of Victoria

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Forward

Temperate grasslands are one of the world's major vegetation systems, occurring widely on all continents except Antarctica. During the past two hundred years, the human influence on natural ecosystems has expanded at an alarming rate. As natural temperate grasslands occur in attractive climates, are generally fertile and easy to exploit, they have been replaced faster than most other ecosystems.

The impacts on the grasslands of south-eastern Australia are typical, and have been catastrophic. Kirkpatrick et al. (1995) titled their book on south-eastern Australia's grasslands: *Australia's most threatened ecosystems*. Of the 35% of the state of Victoria that was covered by grasslands and grassy woodlands 150 years ago, it is estimated that less than 1% survives. Many remaining grasslands have been modified by processes such as overgrazing, altered fire regimes and agricultural disturbance.

For the purpose of this volume, lowland grasslands are considered to be both humid and sub-humid grasslands of temperate south-eastern Australia (cf. McDougall and Kirkpatrick, 1994). These grasslands also include grassy woodlands. Lowland grasslands extend from Victoria to south-east Queensland, with disjunct occurrences in Tasmania. Temperate grasslands also occur in south-west Western Australia.

In late 1991, members of IFFA and James Ross, the then grassland officer for VNPA, independently decided that it was time to hold a conference on grasslands. Firstly, to publicise the parlous state of native lowland grasslands, and secondly, to summarise the information that had been gathered on those threatened ecosystems. VNPA and IFFA combined forces, and on October 2nd and 3rd, 1992 the *Great Plains Crash - a Conference on the Grassland and Grassy Woodlands of Victoria* was held at the Victorian University of Technology campus in Footscray, Victoria.

Some 280 delegates attended a very successful conference. All agreed that the conference had succeeded in publicising the rich history and the urgent need to con-

serve the most endangered of all our major ecosystems. Soon after the conference, programs on grassland conservation were initiated by federal, state and the ACT governments. A further conference, hosted by the ACT Parks and Conservation Service, the Australian Nature Conservation Agency (now Environment Australia) and University of Canberra followed in September 1993.

It was always intended that the proceedings from the *Great Plains Crash* be published. Tapes of the presentations were made and transcribed at great effort. However, the organisers had not secured an editor, and although the conference raised sufficient funds to publish the proceedings, the task of editing and publishing papers remained to be allocated. Finally, six years later, those papers have been prepared, edited and are now available in this joint publication of the VNPA and IFFA.

At the time of the conference, the last significant group of papers on the ecology of lowland native grasslands were a series of papers on the basalt plains of Victoria published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria* in 1963. In the meantime, the World Wide Fund for Nature commissioned and published a survey entitled the *Conservation of Lowland Native Grasslands in South-eastern Australia* (McDougall and Kirkpatrick, 1994) later adapted into a more accessible book (Kirkpatrick et al., 1995). The first publication aimed to identify remnants of native grasslands in south-eastern Australia, classify them floristically and assess their significance, the second, to educate the public about the parlous state of native grasslands.

This collection of papers from the Great Plains Crash is intended to complement those publications. It is broader and more general, encompassing issues such as geology, biogeography, history, Aboriginal management, fauna and community conservation. The emphasis is on Victorian grasslands but many of the problems faced by those grasslands are similar to other lowland grassy ecosystems Australia-wide.

References

Kirkpatrick, J.B., McDougall, K. (1994) *Conservation of lowland native grasslands in south-eastern Australia*. World Wide Fund for Nature Australia, 187 pp.

Kirkpatrick, J.B., McDougall, K and Hyde, M.K. (1995) *Australia's most threatened ecosystem: the southeastern lowland native grasslands*. Surrey Beatty & Sons, Chipping Norton, N.S.W., 110 pp.

Summary of Contents

An overview of grassland ecosystems is presented by Bob Parsons, who has worked with rare grassland plants and the ecology of grasslands for many years. The conference was formally opened by Peter Bridgewater, and his paper summarises the problems faced by the Australian Nature Conservation Agency at the time, and includes a 1996 update. Peter Bridgewater is now the chief scientific advisor at Environment Australia.

The geology of grassy ecosystems is presented by Neville Rosengren, who at the time of the conference was working on a census of the eruption points of the basalt plains of Victoria for Heritage Australia. Two papers are presented by Roger Jones. The first is a biogeographical treatment of grasses in Australia aiming to show the history and biogeography of grass species associated with continental drift. The second paper is a long, sprawling affair that describes the Holocene history of Western Victorian grasslands with relation to climate, the impacts of European occupation and the implications of these histories for future grassland conservation.

Beth Gott describes the intimate relationship that Aboriginal people had with grassland ecosystems. Seen in conjunction with the second paper by Jones, it is clear that Aboriginal people had a relatively consistent approach to grassland management over a very long period of time, although for them, it involved much more than just “management”.

Commentary on the definition of grasslands is provided by Keith McDougall who suggests that grasslands should be defined biogeographically, due to confusion surrounding the term grassland, a term that has been appropriated by many different groups for many different purposes.

Geoff Carr presents a community definition of grasslands on the basalt plains of Victoria. A comprehensive appendix with species and habitat shows that both richness and endemism have been underestimated for these ecosystems. Paul Foreman describes the re-discovery of a rare annual daisy on the Terrick Terrick block in northern Victoria recently purchased by public funds and donations. This grassland remnant is of national significance, and its purchase shows that northern Victorian grasslands, all but forgotten as they disappeared under grazing and irrigation, have a role to play in our understanding of grassy ecosystems.

The role of invertebrates has also been ignored, says Alan Yen, but the current state of grasslands means that understanding their role is problematic. He clearly demonstrates the paradox of conserving taxa whose existence is unknown.

Carl Rayner presents a view from the Friends of the Organ Pipes National Park, who can rightly claim the credit for being the first group to seriously tackle the issue of grassland preservation and reclamation in Victoria. At the conference, Bob MacDonald gave a rousing address on how these concerns could be transferred to all people living in grassland areas. Despite the best efforts of the editors, the transcript did not transfer to the printed page (sorry, Bob).

Pam Thomas describes how the people of Hamilton had managed to deal with the fragile condition of the Eastern Barred Bandicoot. The message is bitter-sweet, especially in regard to the 1996 update, and we wish the locals the best of success in their endeavour.

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to acknowledge the VNPA, especially its former Director, Doug Humann, who, despite the delay in publishing these proceedings, held the conference profits for their printing. The VNPA also contributed through the employment of James Ross as grassland officer, who spent a great deal of time organising the conference and collecting articles from the authors.

The Commonwealth Department of Environment, Sports and Territories supported the conference itself. Their funding is gratefully acknowledged, as is the participation of Dr Peter Bridgewater. IFFA financially supported the production of these proceedings.

People who supported these proceedings include Michelle Arundell, Peter Tucker and Eric Ward who

provided their time to get the contributions together. The transcription of conference presentations was carried out by Stani Butler.

Finally, the editors would like to thank all the contributors, especially those who delivered their articles promptly and must have despaired of them ever reaching the light of day. A thousand pardons for the delay.

A caveat for anyone who ever wants to run a conference and publish the proceedings on the smell of an oily rag — don't consider it, unless editorial support has been factored in beforehand.

This publication also serves as a double volume of the IFFA journal *Advances in Nature Conservation*, the production of which is now closed.

Roger Jones
On behalf of the editorial team
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