

Building Bridges : Grasslands to Rangelands

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Given the uniqueness of this joint International Grassland and Rangeland Congress it is fitting that the Chairs of these two organizations give their opening address jointly . It is also appropriate that the events and actions that have lead to this joint event are recorded .

From the earliest of beginnings , our global grazing lands have been essential to human survival . Our relationship with grazing lands has been increasingly exploitive , but there is now a slow reawakening of our interdependence with the many services provided by grazing lands . Sustaining the natural capital of our grazing lands is crucial , as these areas represent a very large part of our global terrestrial ecosystems . This challenge is grounded in the socio-economic expectations of land users and nations .

Over time , research and development in our global grazing lands has evolved into highly specialized areas . A reductionist emphasis has lead to the understanding of underlying functions and mechanics of grazing lands . This has underpinned increased productivity and product quality in pasture and harvested forages . In contrast , work in rangeland ecosystems has been more oriented towards integrative ecology and sociology . This difference in emphasis lead to the separation of the International Grassland Congress (IGC) and the International Rangeland Congress (IRC) in the 1970s .

Ironically , since then many common areas of interest have emerged in environmental and social concerns , ecology and multifunctional uses of our grazing lands . Increasingly , new bridges are needed to provide interaction and synergy between those people working in rangelands and grasslands .

By the 1990s a groundswell of interest in closer coordination between IGC and IRC was surfacing . Delegates at the XVIII IGC in Canada in 1997 , instructed the Continuing Committee to approach the Continuing Committee of the IRC about the possibility of a joint meeting of the two Congresses , and on possible eventual amalgamation of the two Congresses . In 1997 , Bob Clements (Chair , Continuing Committee , IGC) and Margaret Friedel (Chair , Continuing Committee , IRC) met and set out arguments for and against a shared Congress with a view to ongoing closer coordination of the Congresses . They suggested that such a shared congress might take place by 2003 .

In July 1999 , the IRC met in Townsville , Queensland , Australia . Three motions were put to the delegates as follows : 1) to promote a more efficient and effective interchange of information on all aspects of range and grassland science , and to meet common goals and objectives , the IRC endorses the concept of closer cooperation with the IGC , 2) the chair of the IRC Continuing Committee should explore mechanisms for meeting common goals and objectives with the chair of the IGC Continuing Committee , 3) the IRC endorses the concept of a shared conference with the IGC by the year 2007 and requests the Continuing Committee of the IRC to develop in collaboration with the Continuing Committee of the IGC the framework for a shared Conference program and procedures for selection of a host country . Motions 1 and 2 were passed but motion 3 failed to pass .

Two years later in 2001 at the XIX IGC congress in São Paulo , Brazil , three resolutions were presented to the delegates at the final business meeting , with the first two being the same as the first two at Townsville . The third was : the members of the XIX IGC request that the chair of the IGC Continuing Committee meets with the chair of the IRC Continuing Committee within the next 12 months to jointly identify and promote shared activities for meeting common goals and objectives . All three resolutions were passed unanimously .

Meanwhile , China had submitted an unsuccessful bid for the IGC venue at both the 1997 and the 2001 IGC congresses . Interest was high , however , in developing a bid that would be submitted in Ireland in 2005 for the 2009 IGC venue . To this end , Vivien Allen , IGC Chair , Gavin Sheath (Region 5) , Masakazu Goto (Region 6) and Geza Nagy (Region 10) traveled to China in July 2001 to discuss the potential of China being a venue . It was agreed that the Continuing Committee would work with the Chinese organizers in developing the bid for XXI IGC . Discussions progressed between the IGC Continuing Committee and the organizers in China over the next several months .

In December , 2001 Vivien Allen (chair , IGC) and Jim O'Rourke (member of IRC Continuing Committee) attended a meeting in Washington , D .C . It was revealed that the IRC Continuing Committee was anticipating a bid from China for their 2007 venue while the bid under discussion between the IGC and China was for the 2009 IGC venue . Neither congress had been in China previously . Thus , both were interested in this location but there were obvious concerns about holding two major international

congresses on grazing lands just 2 years apart . A possible solution was to combine these meetings , but Motion 3 from Townsville clearly stood in the way . Much discussion followed with the organizers in China and between the leadership of the two congresses .

Thus , in June , 2002 , Vivien Allen (IGC chair) and Maureen Wolfson (IRC president) met in Chicago , Illinois to discuss the possibility of a joint venue in China for the two congresses . It was agreed that : 1) China would be encouraged to submit a bid to both congresses for a shared meeting in 2008 (one year out of the rotation for each congress) ; 2) the IRC would pursue other bids as well ; 3) the IGC would continue to work toward a China venue . In lieu of the failed Motion 3 from Townsville , it was agreed that at the VII IRC in Durban , South Africa in 2003 , the concept and opportunities of a joint meeting would be presented to the Delegates . It would be emphasized that this was not a suggestion of permanent merging of these congresses , but was a unique opportunity of this particular venue . The vote in Townsville would have to be reversed before the Continuing Committee could vote on the bid from China . Thus , the delegates would be voting on the concept of a shared venue , not on the acceptance of the bid .

At the 2003 IRC held in Durban , South Africa , there was interest from the Chinese in a joint congress to be held in 2008 with IGC in Hohhot , Inner Mongolia , People's Republic of China . Following the vote against such an event at the 1999 IRC in Townsville , considerable lobbying occurred during the Durban congress to convince the membership of the advantages of doing so . The China bid was unanimously accepted . Following the IRC's acceptance of the bid by China for a joint IGC/IRC congress , the IGC Continuing Committee received a parallel bid from China at the Dublin IGC in 2005 . The bid was accepted unanimously . Thus , 8 years after discussions officially began in Canada expressing support for the concept of holding a joint IGC/IRC congress , the bids were accepted and the venue was set for Hohhot in June of 2008 .

Since late 2005 , Gavin Sheath (IGC chair) , Jim O'Rourke (IRC chair) and Gordon King (IRC secretariat) have worked with the China Organizing Committee . The fruits of this joint work are evident in the sponsorship gained and the program developed . Global sponsorship has exceeded US \$ 500 ,000 and is derived from a wide range of sources . The lesson-a joint Congress ensured two similar organizations were not competing for increasingly scarce funding support . The program is a well balanced mix of production , sustainability and people themes-the essence of multifunctional grasslands and rangelands . The lesson-we will make best progress in sustaining the world's grazing lands and communities when we draw on the best brains and experience .

This IGC-IRC 2008 congress provides an opportunity to build bridges between researchers working in different science disciplines and people who are working to develop sustainable systems and communities in different regions of the world . While work involving singular disciplines of study has provided knowledge of greater depth , we also need a better understanding of the interactions and emergent properties of our grazed ecosystems . The long-standing principles of ecology , armed with the analytical power of simulation modeling , has a major role to play in understanding and designing sustainable systems of the future .

People must be an integral part of any future system design . They are not observers and their expectations will shape the way grazed ecosystems will be managed . While some people seek high quality food and a pristine environment , we must recognize that many other communities simply seek a little more food and economic wealth to survive . Good science must not take a political position with regards to resolving tensions and managing our grazed lands in a better way . Rather , it must inform the various communities of interests . In the end , wise solutions will be a balance of tradeoffs that are based on informed decisions and actions .

It will be interesting if the desired changes we seek in people will occur voluntarily , or will require incentives and regulations . Like most things in life , a mix will probably be required to ensure the necessary knowledge and motivation is in place .

As we address the urgencies of global warming , a growing global population that demands higher living standards and a better diet , social stability , alternative energy sources , and protection of our environment and natural resources , we increasingly turn to our global grazing lands resources to find solutions . New bridges have brought together the IGC and the IRC for the first time in history in Hohhot , Inner Mongolia in the Peoples Republic of China . Perhaps history will look upon this as the stimulus for new collaborations that will lead ultimately to solving these grand challenges .