

President's Report 2006

As the last report in my office as Honorary President I would like to focus on a major challenge that faces the Society, and to highlight the benefits to members that have accrued in recent years.

Our major challenge is to boost membership of the Society. The Treasurer's report details the decrease in membership that has occurred. Our ordinary membership has reduced from 328 to 184 in the last three years while student membership has increased, although it is rather ephemeral. At the beginning of my tenure as President I was aware of the trends in membership, and the executive and council resolved to turn this around by demonstrating and boosting the benefits to members. We also carried out a targeted membership drive late in 2005 where 10 different institutions were approached via members within those institutions. This has not resulted in a turn around of membership renewals, although feedback was received that indicated some reasons for declining membership.

What has changed over the last decade that would reduce the need for plant researchers and academics to be members of ASPS? There are several issues that can be developed from this question.

Is it possible that the reduced membership is an indicator of the general health of plant sciences? This question is currently being analysed for the benefit of members, and if it is found that the state of health is not particularly good we will need to lobby hard with our governments; State and Federal. It would seem to be unlikely however that all of the reduction in membership could reflect a decline in plant science effort at a National level.

It may be conjectured that there is no longer the impetus on individuals to be a member of a scientific society like there used to be several years ago. This is in spite of the fact that society membership is still positively recognised in institutional promotion committees as an indicator of service to the discipline. Assuming that plant scientists continue to provide service to their discipline at a similar fraction that they did a decade ago, the drop in membership in ASPS could be due to dilution of that service across a broader range of activities.

Greater specialisation and society-like activities are being undertaken by such entities as CRCs and Centres. These entities have many functions that can replace those traditionally carried out by a scientific society, and furthermore they consume time that would otherwise be at the disposal of society activities such as attendance at the annual meetings, public education and popular press publications. CRCs and Research Centres provide much needed investment in plant science research, but we need to ensure that membership of a broader society is not reduced because of more activities associated with such centres. Again we must examine the real benefits that membership of ASPS provides and if it is found wanting for a particular group we need to do something about it. Perhaps ASPS needs to be more involved in plant based CRCs and research centres.

Another possibility is that our members are engaged in other societies, eg Agronomy, Plant Pathology, Viticulture and Oenology, Plant Ecology etc. All can be claimed as firmly based in “plant science”. Could it be that our broad claim on many plant science disciplines has had the effect that we are not considered specialised enough for any sub-disciplines in particular? There is also the likelihood that there are too many conferences in the different sub-disciplines resulting in ComBio becoming the last preference and even clashing with other conferences. We should be engaging with related societies such as the Australian Plant Pathology Society to encourage them to come in to ComBio.

The recognition of excellence in research and teaching has been a focus of ASPS in recent years and is a very important benefit to members, since without being a member one cannot entertain the prospects of winning an award. The Goldacre award remains the premier award in research for early career researchers and the Teaching Award is being recognised as a premier award for tertiary educators. These two awards alone are good reasons for membership and involvement in the society, particularly in these times where peer recognition of excellence counts toward career advancement and broader department and institutional recognition with the public and government. Involvement in a Society is also still recognised in institutional promotions as demonstration of good academic citizenship.

We now have even more to offer our membership with the Functional Plant Biology Best Paper award, and the R.N. Robertson fellowship, two new awards that have been well received. These awards are targeted at early career researchers, and we expect their value to only increase with time. Again both awards are only available to members.

Student members gain substantially by travel assistance to ComBio, various prizes for their presentations and a subsidised ticket to our annual dinner.

All these awards represent a significant time input by the council and executive of the ASPS and during the year they would constitute the majority of our time for the society. I would like to thank at this point all those who were involved in assessing the awards, including some of our Corresponding Members.

Perhaps the targeting of our benefits mainly to early career members is reflected by healthy student numbers. Perhaps we now need to focus on mid career members, and members at later stages in their career, because it is in this category where we seem to be taking the losses. We have recognition of excellence for these members in the form of the J.G. Wood and R.N. Roberston plenary lectures at ComBio, but perhaps we need to do more.

The Society is currently in a very healthy state financially, this is largely the result of remaining in the ComBio fold and through the excellent efforts of Peter Ryan, as Honorary Treasurer, in obtaining Sustaining Members. The Society has \$85,000 in cash reserves. This is of no value with a declining membership and now is the time to use these funds to the benefit of members. It will be the task of the new council and executive to develop new benefits for members and to invest these funds in such a way that there will be no choice but for every plant scientist in Australia to feel obliged to join up and to be comfortable as a member of ASPS.

Finally it remains for me to thank the executive for their superb efforts and enthusiasm through the year and to the council members for their support of various initiatives. I wish to particularly thank John Patrick, who has been tireless in his efforts and support to the executive. Also Peter Ryan for keeping the Society in such an excellent financial position so that new initiatives can be undertaken in the future. I thank the outgoing council members: Brent Kaiser, John Harper, Eloise Foo, and Tim Colmer for their work for the Society. I also wish to thank the supporting sub-committees; Marilyn Ball (Public Officer), Graham Farquhar (FASTS representative), Brian Atwell (Plants in Action), Jennifer Henry (FBP); and last but not least the Phytogen Editors Helen Irving and Andy Netting.

I wish the new executive and Council all the very best for the coming year.

Steve Tyerman
President ASPS