

EGF Conference 2012, Lublin, Poland

Grassland – A European Resource?

Conference synthesis

by Johannes Isselstein

1. Introduction

‘Grassland - a European Resource?’ was the title of the 24th General Meeting of the European Grassland Federation.

In the ‘Foreword’ of the Conference Proceedings it is stated that this meeting aims at the stimulation of the discussion about the future of European grasslands and their management and related functions. And that this would be a hot topic being of great importance.

There is no doubt that the awareness of grassland as an important resource has been increasing among the public and among politicians during the last years. As an example: the European Commission as well as national politics are searching for measures to sustain grasslands and the ecosystem services coming along with grassland management. You might have realized that the title of this conference was completed with a question mark. This – obviously – would have not been necessary as Grassland is a European resource. Consequently, grassland science is important to provide insights and options for sustainable grassland management for the future. However, when I did promenade through the lobby of the conference building, grabbing snatches of lobby conversations and also during the Executive Committee meeting of EGF I could hear concerns with regard to the importance and impact of our scientific community and whether we are sufficiently prepared to face the challenges of the future. Concerns that could be put into questions such as: Do we pose the right scientific questions? Is our science sound and relevant? Where are we going as a scientific community? Will we remain over time? Is our science competitive among the range of scientific disciplines? Will we be relying on continuous support of our research by national and international funding bodies? Are we sufficiently attracting young scientists so that we are not at risk of extinction?

Scientific conferences play an important role in the life of a scientific community. They provide a forum to exchange recent scientific ideas and findings and to develop

targeted networks for collaborative research. Consequently, they help to develop a common view on the societies' self-conception. Therefore, EGF meetings should contribute to the improvement of our science, they should strengthen our position among the range of scientific disciplines. And they should impact on the farming practice.

In the following I will be trying to analyse the success of this conference and I will do this by focussing on those features that indicate some change compared to former conferences. This is necessarily a personal view and is likely not doing full justice to this conference. However, I should mention that I collected several views among the delegates for which I am grateful.

I would like to start with our attempts to reach society.

2. Linking science with stakeholders

Over the recent years we could see that General Meetings started to improve linkages with stakeholders. In Sweden in 2008 a farmer and extension workshop was connected to the scientific conference, in Kiel 2010, a stakeholder workshop was organized within the MULTISWARD project. And this conference went further this line. There were several examples being presented in Session 5.1 (Effects of political driving forces). E.g. Van den Pol-van Dasselaar et al. analysed the stakeholders' view on grassland farming and our duties as scientists. Linking with stakeholders is nowadays very much required by funding bodies not only with regard to the questions we pose but also to the adoption of our knowledge and innovation. A further example is, as we have just heard in the EGF Business Meeting, that EGF was improving its contacts to Brussels which I think is very important for us. Our expertise is obviously required and asked for.

3. Providing a platform for various activities

EGF meetings have always been a forum for various activities and interactions among delegates. However, I got the impression that this is now also more formalized and targeted and may thus be more effective. In Lublin we have seen various well prepared satellite events, two master classes for young scientists, three active workshops, a new workshop on semi-natural grasslands has been launched. General Meetings are now increasingly being recognized as a platform for additional activities around grassland science which I think is a very good thing and we should further develop this.

4. Progress in science

As with all scientific conferences there are excellent contributions and there are good contributions and I am not going to value this in detail. Rather I would again like highlighting topics that I thought played a more prominent role during this conference.

4.1. The grassland resource and the history of grassland

Our Polish colleagues provided a good overview on grassland as a Polish resource. The introductory paper by Warda & Kozłowski but also other contributions such as by Zarzycki & Korzeniak, Grzelak & Bocian, Kryszak et al. or Wyłupek et al. demonstrated the diversity and the value of the Polish grassland very well. And also during the mid-conference tours we got a good impression of Polish grasslands. Somewhat related to this we heard a thrilling lecture on the history of grasslands by Hejcman et al. and we learned that our activities will have a long-lasting impact on the landscape. The importance of European grasslands as a huge resource has implicitly been shown also with many production orientated contributions, as e.g. the review lectures by Peeters, by Laidlaw & Sebek on grassland based animal production systems or by Donnellan et al. with the focus on dairy production. But it is not only production in terms of feed and food, it is as well and with an increasing attention the non-agricultural role of grasslands. Żurek summarized the current status of research and application on amenity grasses and grasslands and Parente & Bovolenta provided an overview on the role of grasslands for agri- and ecotourism.

A wealth of detailed studies were presented in the course of the conference with the recurrent theme of how to manage trade-offs between production, resource efficiency and sustainability of grassland systems. This general challenge is likely to keep us busy over the next years.

4.2. Biodiversity and Ecosystem services

Another topic that played an increasing role during this conference was the biodiversity of grasslands and the ecosystem services coming along with it. There has been a top-grade discussion among ecologists on this subject over the last 15 years. This discussion has been taken up by grassland scientists in order to adopt the ideas for the benefit of farming. During this conference it was shown that there is a high potential for increased diversity to support grassland production. This seems particularly true for a ley farming situation where sown mixtures of several grasses and forbs/clovers showed a higher performance than the corresponding pure or species-poor stands (shown e.g. by Finn et al., Helgadottir et al., Collins et al.). There were however also contributions that showed no strong biodiversity effects such as those presented by Janicka et al., Tomic et al. or From et al. There is obviously the need for more research into the processes that generate production advantages of

diversity in grasslands and the plenary paper by Christian Huyghe gave an inspiring conceptual framework for this.

A rising issue for grassland science is to set biodiversity benefits in a wider 'environment' of grassland management and production than merely herbage yield. On this conference this was obvious for herbage quality, animal performance and the nutritive quality of animal products like milk and meat. There were some interesting examples for this given by Scollan in his plenary paper but also in other contributions such as of Wyss, Petersen et al. and many others. Looking at the benefits of biodiversity along the value chain from herbage production to nutritional benefits for humans is likely to attract increasing attention in the future.

4.3. Technological innovations

Technological innovations played a role in various sessions and workshops during the conference. We saw several nice examples with regard to grazing and grazing management. There is a lot of research going on in tracing grazing animals to get an improved understanding on the spatio-temporal behaviour of the grazers, e.g. by Oudshoorn et al., Homburger et al., Bele et al. and Chodkiewicz & Stypiński. Walking, grazing, ruminating, choice of food items etc. determine the animals' performance and through interactions with the sward also the grass sward performance. A better insight in the grazers' behaviour is needed to improve the grazing management on-farm for the benefit of animal production and health but also to control for emission risks of grazing. Milk production from grazed grassland and the potential of technological innovations was demonstrated for automatic milking at pasture (Van den Pol-van Dasselaar et al., Dufresne et al.).

Another issue where grassland research is making strong progress through technological innovations is the bioenergy production. This was demonstrated by Session 3.1 'Renewable energy from grass' covering the whole range of process and engineering related research. There is now no more doubt that sustainable energy production from grassland is going to keep research and the farming practice busy for the years to come.

5. The framework of the conference

A scientific conference can only be successful if it provides a functioning and pleasant environment.

There is no doubt about it that this conference was excellently organised. Everything was obviously well thought through beforehand and it all went smooth and efficient. This holds for the scientific programme and the written results of it but also for the whole conference here in Lublin. We had very warm welcome and several very

emotional social events with the conference dinner being a marvellous and memorable highlight. As far as I could see the delegates enjoyed the conference a lot and they all were in a good mood. We should not underestimate the significance this has for the overall success of the conference.

I know from own experiences that organizing a conference is an honour but at the same time a burden and you have to put in quite a bit of effort to get it on the way.

Our Polish colleagues did an excellent job! Prof. Stypiński as the EGF president, Prof. Goliński as the chairman of the scientific committee, Prof. Harkot who was obviously the mastermind behind everything that happened here in Lublin, and, of course, Mariusz Kulik, the conference secretary, who could be found all the time everywhere (the same as on the soccer pitch where he proved to be the best EGF football striker ever), and the many, many helping hands which I am not able to name. They were all very dedicated to this conference and they did it with a strong passion. They would anticipate your wish even before you could express it.

Dziękuję Polsko!

Dziękuję Polscy Koledzy! for this conference, for the overwhelming hospitality and for the good time we were allowed to share with you in your country.