

## Weed Societies: building better communications between weed stakeholders

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**Summary** On becoming the Secretary of the Weed Society of Victoria I began to fully realise the true value of the organisation, and appreciate the community created from its membership and event participants. Although the main aim of most weed societies is to take a role in actively promoting awareness of weeds, weed societies offer much more. Events hosted by weed societies provide opportunities for participants to hear of projects being undertaken by a wide variety of people from weed experts through to community groups at local, state, federal and even international levels or combinations of any of these. Often, people come to weed society functions from an array of organisations and would not necessarily be given opportunities to share their work with a wider audience otherwise.

Speak to those involved in weed societies and you will be met with enthusiasm of how society networking has returned benefits that would never have been possible otherwise. Participants may see a presentation that provides valuable information, or a casual chat with a fellow participant may prove to be a fruitful link in sourcing an expert or even funding towards a project. For example, when Tasmanian and Victorian weed risk assessment staff met at a Weed Society of Victoria conference, a professional link was established. This led to the sharing of scientific research and literature that ultimately supported the declaration of several invasive species in Tasmania. The connection eliminated the same information being reviewed a second time unnecessarily, saving time and money.

**Keywords** Council of Australasian Weed Societies, networking.

### WEED SOCIETIES

**Structure of Societies** Each Australian state has a state weed society (with the ACT included by The Weed Society of NSW Inc.) and New Zealand has a national level weed society. Each of the Australian societies and the New Zealand Plant Protection Society Inc. (NZPPS) provide two committee representatives, to form the Council of Australasian Weed Societies (CAWS 2008–14). At a higher level, CAWS is an associate member of the International Weed Science Society and is affiliated with the European Weed Research Society and the Asian-Pacific Weed Science Society (CAWS 2008–14).

**Aims and objectives, and how to achieve them** Under their aims and objectives, weed societies generally have tendrils running across the same themes with some societies branching out a little more adventurously. Scanning their websites reveals a commonality in striving to raise awareness, education, promotion, encouraging, supporting, participating in, studying and providing independent leadership and advice in the field of weeds. Overall, the Societies have a vision of minimising economic, environmental and social impacts of weeds, with some expanding their scope to include invasive animals and pathogens.

Weed Societies support their aims and objectives by providing a committee who can facilitate the sharing of knowledge and networking by organising events such as forums, workshops, seminars, field days and conferences. Members and non-members alike can meet and greet in these semi-formal environments and find common goals and possibly a stakeholder to collaborate with.

In conjunction with these events, societies also disseminate scientific and practical information through journal publications and conference proceedings, a regular newsletter for members, and websites which often include links to contact details for their committee members, other organisations or useful information. An interesting example of support material is the 'For Students' page of The Weed Society of New South Wales which offers links to educational resources to introduce the concept of weeds starting in the early primary school years (WSNSW 2012). In a more formal capacity, state weed societies support the Council of Australasian Weed Societies by providing two delegates to participate in Australian and trans-Tasman discussions on common weed matters. Weed Societies may choose to affiliate themselves with other beneficial societies, networks, organisations, community groups and stakeholders that are seen to have a common interest or goal in natural resource management.

### MEMBERSHIP

Membership of weed societies is becoming increasingly diverse, open to anyone with 'an active interest in any aspect of weeds' (WSV 2014), This a reflection of the variety of industry and community stakeholders taking responsibility for managing weeds in

agricultural and natural landscapes, as well as landscaped gardens. Previously, both CAWS and The Weed Society of Victoria (WSV) included 'Science' in their respective names. Both have now removed 'Science' from their names 'to assist in recognising the diversity of personnel involved in weed management' (CAWS 2008–14).

Although the societies structure their membership eligibility and fees differently, their membership is welcoming of 'all persons and organisations interested in weeds, and their management, to become members' (WSQ 2014). Society members include 'students, researchers, and weed management practitioners' (WMSSA 2014), CSIRO, Astron (a multidisciplinary environmental and engineering firm (Astron 2014)) (WSWA 2014), 'scientists, commercial company representatives, growers, foresters... regional and local government' (NZPPS 2014), field workers/officers, authors and gardeners.

Members are offered a range of benefits which may include, but are not limited to, receiving a weed society newsletter, email communications, involvement in advocacy, discounts to associated publications, discounts to seminars and conferences of the state society and Australian/New Zealand levels, and eligibility for travel grants offered by the state society and CAWS. However, most members will agree the most important benefit is that of networking and having a forum for discussion and discovery of the projects being carried out by other stakeholders in the community.

Though being a weed society member offers all this, becoming a weed society committee member has even more to offer as you engage with not only the membership base, but other stakeholders during the organisation of newsletter publications, seminars and conferences. During this process, committee members have the opportunity to converse with stakeholders who are potential writers and speakers. This process often leads one to being introduced to third party stakeholders whom you have never heard of and whose work you have never seen, but that may enhance the work you do. This paper looks at two case studies that explore these networking benefits.

## DISCUSSIONS

Content for discussions can encapsulate many trends and ideas. Commonly, weed societies provide an environment for cross-organisational and open discussion on any, all, or more than the following:

- weed biology and ecology;
- control methods such as chemical and biological, and possible resistance;
- the effects of management;
- broader weed science and technology;

- policy positions and advice;
- planning and strategies;
- operations and participation;
- best practice management and prevention;
- new developments in research and practice;
- new and emerging species;
- interactions between local, state: national and international jurisdictions and geographical boundaries;
- advocacy and/or lobbying;
- biosecurity and quarantine; and
- history and art.

**Case study #1** Michael Noble, a weed risk assessment officer assessing *Nassella* species for potential declaration in Tasmania joined the Weed Society of Victoria (WSV) when he became a Weed Management Planning Officer with the Tasmanian Government. The reason he became a member of WSV was to support his role with the Tasmanian Government by meeting others who had similar interests, or were employed in natural resource management, with whom he could share information with, and learn from. Joining the WSV was of particular interest for Michael, as many major threats to Tasmania's biosecurity come from Victoria via shipping and air movement, despite the best efforts of quarantine staff.

By attending events held by WSV, Michael met and established networks with many weed management staff from the Victorian Government, and Weeds of National Significance national coordinators from around Australia. I spoke to Michael about the benefits of meeting a Victorian weed risk assessment officer at a WSV conference in April 2008. Michael recounts the following:

'At that time I was tasked with constructing the case (through risk assessment and a background study) for Tasmania to declare further weeds from the *Nassella* genus. I was to ascertain which additional *Nassella* species warranted declaration in Tasmania and to progress research on these species to the point where they could, if necessary, be declared.

Victoria had already researched these weeds for relevant declarations under their legislation. Staff from the weed risk assessment and research area in the Victorian Government kindly provided us with research and other scientific information on the weed species, and this expedited the declaration process in Tasmania. These people were contacts I had made by attending WSV events'.

Tasmania's population is approximately equivalent to that of the municipality of the City of Greater

Geelong in Victoria, and the capacity of the Tasmanian Government to commit staff for the purpose of weed risk assessment and research is more limited than that of larger states. The assistance provided by the Victorian Weed Risk Assessment Team was therefore significant in terms of saving Tasmanian staff a great deal of research time and associated costs because this eliminated interstate duplication of effort. At the time the Victorian information regarding *Nassella* species was shared, it equated to approximately \$36,000 of resources.

In addition to this, Michael states ‘Victoria had risk assessed a significant number of *Nassella* species, and being able to access their assessments meant that Tasmania could rule out the need to assess certain species’, saving further time and associated costs. As an added bonus, ‘Tasmania was able to risk assess these weed species (using a different system to that used in Victoria), and then compare outcomes, using both Tasmanian and Victorian findings to justify the declaration of species posing a threat’.

The species later determined for declaration and subsequently declared were Mexican feather grass (*Nassella tenuissima* (Trin.) Barkworth), cane needle grass (*Nassella hyalina* (Nees) Barkworth), Texas needle grass (*Nassella leucotricha* (Trin. & Rupr.) R.W.Pohl), and lobed needle grass (*Nassella charuana* (Arechav.) Barkworth).

For further information regarding Victorian and Tasmanian legislation and weed risk assessment framework, please visit the following sites respectively:

- Victorian Resources Online: [http://vro.depi.vic.gov.au/dpi/vro/vrosite.nsf/pages/lwm\\_pest\\_plants](http://vro.depi.vic.gov.au/dpi/vro/vrosite.nsf/pages/lwm_pest_plants)
- Tasmanian Invasive Species Weed Index: <http://dipwe.tas.gov.au/invasive-species/weeds/weeds-index>

**Case study #2** In the mid 2000s, Matt Stephenson, a community pest plant and animal officer with the Bass Coast Landcare Network, attended a Weed Society of Victoria seminar where he viewed a presentation from Greg Lefoe who was working as a research officer on the biological control of *Asparagus asparagoides* (L.) Druce (bridal creeper) at the Keith Turnbull Research Institute (KTRI). Some years later, the opportunity arose for Matt to undertake bridal creeper control work with the local Landcare groups of the Bass Coast. Matt was able to track down Greg though a fellow member of the Weed Society of Victoria whom turned out to be a colleague of Greg’s.

At KTRI, Greg was busy raising a culture of bridal creeper rust and a colony of bridal creeper beetles for release at suitable sites of bridal creeper infestations.

Matt on the other hand, had many sites infested with bridal creeper and needed to find a more effective control method than the local Landcare groups laboriously hand digging the stubborn tubers out, or foliar herbicide spraying with expensive chemicals. When the opportunity arose, Matt approached Greg, via a contact through the WSV, to request that they tackle the bridal creeper problem together.

Whilst Greg had a glasshouse full of infected bridal creeper, Matt had an army of volunteers with the on-ground knowledge of where the best bridal creeper release sites would be, and the willingness to complete the fieldwork (and use of a Parks Victoria fire truck to spray ‘spore water’) for releasing the biological control agents. Engaging a community network through a Landcare staff member meant the relationship between researcher and on-ground volunteers was supported, enabling appropriate communication each way.

The success of this partnership between researchers, land managers and community network is best summed up in Lefoe and Stephenson (2011). ‘The impact of biological control is optimised if researchers work closely with land managers and community groups to rear and release new biological control agents and redistribute agents from established sites... Apart from facilitating widespread release, land managers and community groups are often best placed to identify sites for biological control, and ensure biological control is integrated with local and regional weed management planning’.

The achievements of this partnership were in turn, shared back to the WSV community with a peer reviewed journal article ‘Biological control of bridal creeper in southern Victoria: research to community action’, presented by Greg Lefoe and Matt Stephenson at WSV’s seminar ‘Many ways to manage a weed’ in 2013. This information has been further disseminated through the Landcare newsletter and through the production of a DVD by the Bass Coast Landcare network on pest plant and animal control in the Bass Coast area.

The obvious benefits from this collaboration are the:

- establishment of a vast number/area of bridal creeper infestations infected with a biological control agent through community knowledge and on-ground effort;
- financial benefit of utilising volunteers to release the biological control agents;
- financial benefit to the community groups and private landholders in reducing the need for herbicide use;
- reduction in efforts of physical removal/treatment of infestations which allow resources to be redirected to other areas; and

- improved biodiversity and environment.

Matt estimates that at least 30 sites were able to be treated by the volunteers, Bass Coast Shire, Phillip Island Nature Parks and South Gippsland Landcare Network, something Greg could not have completed on his own. As the rust had reduced the bridal creeper infestations so significantly, an estimated minimum of AU\$20,000 was redirected from bridal creeper treatments that were no longer needed to other projects in the region.

This collaboration opened the doors for more benefits than could have been foreseen. The experience helped define the criteria for identifying situations where engagement of community can be utilised in rearing and releasing biological control agents. From this, and similar projects, it was then realised that community groups had the need to have ownership and the ability to share knowledge of biological control programs. The staff at KTRI then developed the Weed Biological Control component within the Atlas of Living Australia project (<http://root.ala.org.au/bdrs-core/wbiocont/home.htm>) and successfully gained funding for this. That site allows community stakeholders to record GPS locations of established biological control agents within a public database, enabling other stakeholders to harvest and redistribute agents to additional field sites.

This case study demonstrates how following up on a simple link through a weed society can result in a highly successful collaboration providing benefits to many stakeholders and lead onto other highly valued projects providing much further benefit than ever intended.

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countless hours their committees voluntarily contribute in the effort of administering weed societies, associated events, publications and their endeavours in protecting our environment and agricultural industries against invasive plants and in some cases, invasive animals and pathogens. In particular, I thank the Weed Society of Victoria for their support and encouragement for my position as secretary. I also acknowledge and thank the members who provide essential funding without which weed societies could not function.

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Note: The Tasmanian Weed Society's website was unavailable at the time of this publication.