

**OPENING BY THE VICE CHANCELLOR OF THE
JOINT 42ND ANNUAL CONGRESS OF THE
GRASSLAND SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN AFRICA
& 4TH ANNUAL THICKET FORUM MEETING**

16 July 2007

The chairperson, officials of the Grassland Society of Southern Africa and the Thicket Forum, the Organising Committee, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, molweni, good morning.

Thank you for the kind invitation to open this gathering and a warm welcome to you all to Rhodes University, to iRhini/Grahamstown, to the Makana District and the Eastern Cape. And to our international guests from other parts of Africa and the world, a very warm welcome to South Africa.

It is a great honour for Rhodes University to host this Joint 42nd Annual Congress of the Grassland Society of Southern Africa & 4th Annual Thicket Forum Meeting. I trust that you will find our facilities in accordance with your needs, and us convivial hosts.

I am a simple sociologist whose research field is higher education studies. And so my knowledge of rangeland ecology and pasture management and the subtropical

thicket biome is not just extremely limited but, to be honest, non-existent. However, one is never too old to learn and part of the fun of being a Vice Chancellor is to be invited to gatherings such as yours and to visit new websites and to learn about intellectual endeavours and research and debates in disciplines and fields other than ones own.

Three statements in the documents for this conference especially caught my attention. Permit me to make some observations on each of them.

The first statement was that both the Grassland Society and thicket Forum 'are interdisciplinary fora with a central interest in linking human livelihoods, agricultural production and biodiversity conservation'.

This wonderfully brings together the social (human livelihood), the economic (agricultural production), and the ecological (biodiversity conservation), and signals to me an acute understanding on your part that the development challenge of our society is how do we simultaneously, not consecutively or sequentially, address and balance social, and economic needs and do this in a manner that is environmentally sustainable.

To put it in another way, your statement is a specific formulation of the overall four-fold development challenge that confronts South Africa and underdeveloped or so-called 'developing countries': that is how do we pursue **economic growth**, with **social equity**, and do so in a way that is **environmentally sustainable**; that recognises the need to extend, deepen and consolidate **democracy** in our societies; and finally and crucially, do all of this simultaneously and not consecutively or sequentially.

For many good social reasons it is not an option to postpone one or other elements of this four-fold development challenge or to tackle them in sequence. They have to be confronted, by and large, simultaneously. Further, we need a thick conception of development that is simultaneously human, economic, social, cultural and environmental and not just reduced to economic growth.

This is a formidable challenge, and requires great imagination, creativity and boldness with respect to how we define our social and economic goals, how we develop and implement policies and how we monitor the impact of our policies and practices.

There is, however, no other way – not if we wish to be stable equitable and just societies and leave a world that future generations can inhabit without the threats of great calamities that we seem to be so selfishly and recklessly keen to bring upon ourselves and bestow upon our children grandchildren and their children.

The second statement that caught my eye was the reference to both the Grassland Society and thicket Forum being ‘interdisciplinary fora’.

As you well recognise the pressing problems and challenges of our natural and social worlds have no respect for the academic disciplines and fields that have evolved over centuries and refuse to elegantly confine themselves to the boundaries that we have drawn around our disciplines and fields. There is value to maintaining a distinction between different disciplines and fields, especially in undergraduate teaching. However, we sometimes unnecessarily make ourselves prisoners of disciplines and fields instead of being open to a meeting of minds around common problems and concerns in an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary way that can engender imaginative new approaches to formulating issues and researching and addressing them.

[Provide example of visit to Environmental Biotechnology Research Unit – need for social sciences and social understanding alongside technology – and truth of this with respect to the challenges of the UNESCO-supported Bushman's River project!]

The final statement that was of interest to me was this conference was expected to comprise of 'academics, land users and government agents'. Having for the past 17 years been involved in higher education policy research and policy development and having for 7 years served as the head of the higher education policy advisory body to two Ministers of Education, it is my experience that the specific constituencies of academics, government, business and civil society are not always easy to bring together, and especially to hold together.

This is not because there is not recognition among all such constituencies of the need to work together and to build mutually respectful, beneficial, reciprocal relations to address our common concerns and challenges. The reality, however, is that there are sometimes (but perhaps here I am being too diplomatic and I should say that there are often) different and divergent interests, varying immediate concerns and therefore, understandably, differences emerge

in how issues are conceptualised, which issues are prioritised, the discourses and languages through which they are discussed, and how approaches, strategies and the like are formulated.

In my view this is an unavoidable element of the coming together of different constituencies and a not unhealthy aspect of different constituencies finding each other and learning to think, debate and labour together. Whatever difficulties and tensions may arise, the important thing is to appreciate the value of such coming together, to be sensitive and respectful of different views and to recognise that we need each other if we are to address the concerns, problems and challenges that are our common lot.

To the extent that you successfully bring and hold together academics, land users, government and other constituencies, my congratulations to you on this endeavour and significant achievement.

[In closing - story of lost keys searched for under a street light!]

I don't know what proportion of time you spend in the light or in the dark. But what I am clear about is that universities

and scientific disciplines and fields, must focus not only on lit areas but must also illuminate areas of darkness as part of their essential role of advancing human understanding of our natural and social worlds.

Universities and scientific disciplines and fields must, however, also illuminate in another sense. Beyond communicating with a peer scientific community, they must also engage around science and knowledge with other social actors who have an interest in the results of intellectual labour.

Stephen Jay Gould notes, there is a 'long and honorable tradition of popular presentation of science', and we should not make the 'mistake' of 'equating popularization with trivialization, cheapening, or inaccuracy'.

He rightly states that 'the concepts of science, in all their richness and ambiguity, can be presented without any compromise, without any simplification counting as distortion, in language accessible to all...people'.

This stress on communicating beyond simply a scientific community is a call to ensure that our universities, as part of their knowledge generation and dissemination roles, engage

actively with the South African public and act as catalysts of public education. After all, we are, as universities, meant to advance the public and social good.

I wish you an enjoyable stay at Rhodes University and in Rhini/Grahamstown, a stimulating and productive congress and conference, and trust this occasion will contribute to the further development of the Grassland Society and Thicket forum and to future exchanges of this kind.

And, I declare this Joint 42nd Annual Congress of the Grassland Society of Southern Africa & 4th Annual Thicket Forum Meeting officially open!