**2022 President’s Report**

**AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY OF PLANT SCIENTISTS**

**Dr Peter Ryan**

The ASPS President and Executive are responsible for managing several activities each year.

Annual Meetings: The second half of 2021 saw Covid restrictions relaxed in some states but not others. Therefore, the annual meeting planned for Canberra was replaced with a hybrid-style annual meeting whereby ASPS members in each of the states held concurrent face-to-face meetings with a pre-planned link-up for plenary talks and presentations from the award winners. A hybrid-style AGM followed the next day. The expected technical hitches did not eventuate and positive feedback was received from all sites. The success of the meeting was likely boosted by a cathartic zeal many of us experienced after being released from lock-down.

In 2022 ASPS joined with four other biological societies to convene ComBio2022 in Melbourne (27-30 September). With more than 1,000 registrants and >700 abstracts submitted it promises to be an exciting event. The AGM and annual dinner will be run during ComBio2022.

We were very pleased when Professor Rudi Appels accepted our invitation to deliver the J.G. Wood Plenary Lecture at ComBio2022. Rudi’s work over many years at CSIRO, Murdoch University and more recently Univ Melbourne is well-known and highly regarded. He has played a pivotal role in sequencing and annotating the wheat genome and for helping us to negotiate its complexity.

The 2023 Annual meeting and AGM is planned for Tasmania – likely Launceston.

ASPS Annual Awards: One of the major functions of the Executive each year is to recognise excellence and present awards. While the identity of judges traditionally remains confidential, we can reveal that four highly-regarded scientists from Australia and overseas assessed the Goldacre Medal, three judged the Jan Anderson Award and three ranked the FPB Best Paper Prize (along with a final adjudicator). The Hank Greenway Award for Education and Outreach and the R.N. Roberston Travelling Awards were judged by the Executive. We are very proud of our deserving winners and congratulate the following:

Maria Ermakova (ANU) - Goldacre Medal

Frances Sussmilch (UTas) - Jan Anderson Award

The Adelaide University Team that organised the 2021 National Science Week events

 - Hank Greenway Award for Education and Outreach

Oscar Fung (UMelb) and Nattiwong Pankasem (UCSD)

- R.N Roberston Travelling Scholarships (Oscar to UK, NP to ANU)

Akitomo Kawasaki (CSIRO) - FPB Best paper by an ECR

ASPS Officers: The President and Treasurer are finishing their terms in 2022. Nominations have been received for these positions and these will be put to the vote during the AGM. Other positions are also available among the discipline reps. I encourage anyone interested in serving on the Council to make yourself known to the Secretary who will be very pleased to hear from you.

I want to especially thank Janet Wheeler for her essential assistance with the website and her ongoing duties managing the ASPS membership. Janet also revamped the website earlier this year and added some extra history and information on past committee members. Thanks also to Georgia Koerber for editing the Phytogen. Georgia gathers useful articles and information throughout the year and organises all communications to our members. These are both very important services.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: ASPS recognises the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion in our Society and has actively encouraged it. Most importantly, we generated a new position on our executive team for a DEI Officer solely focused on this area. Our first DEI officer is Eloise Foo (UTas) who, together with helpers, has already drafted two initiatives during their first year. The first of these, launched recently, facilitates ASPS members with key family-care responsibilities to attend the annual meeting by funding a support person to travel with them. The second initiative will encourage First Nations members of ASPS to attend meetings by providing travel support for them. This second initiative will hopefully roll out next year. Congratulations to Eloise and her helpers for their efforts.

Outreach Initiative: ASPS continues to be conscious of falling enrolments in plant science and agriculture-related subjects at schools and universities. This trend is especially alarming considering the unprecedented challenges to food security posed by population growth and climate change. To raise the awareness of plant science to the wider community ASPS obtained funding from the Australian Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources to run a series of events around the country as part of National Science Week last year. These events were a mixture of face-to-face activities and online and covered a diverse range of topics from plant growth to healthy diets and climate change. The events were very well received and the team that organised the events at Adelaide University were recognised with our Society’s 2022 award for Educational and Outreach.

Another outreach activity involved ASPS joining like organisations around the world to condemn Russia’s aggression in eastern Europe and their invasion of Ukraine. The Society offered assistance to locate hosts in Australian institutions for scientists and technologists fleeing this embattled region.

Global Plant Council: GPC is a coalition of organisations involved in plant biology, agriculture and environmental sciences around the globe. They aim to support those involved in scientific research and training and to increase awareness of plant science in academia and society. Ros Gleadow (Monash Univ) is the current President of GPC. During the year I communicated with the Chief Communications Officer Isabel Mendoza to discuss diversity and inclusion in science, to help draft a statement for the COP26 meeting in Glasgow and to discuss how GPC could support Ukrainian scientists.

Science and Technology Australia/ Science Meets Parliament: STA is Australia’s peak body for science and technology professionals from ~80 member organisations. Its purpose is to conducts outreach sessions and campaigns to influence public policy in STEM-related areas. Rachel Burton is a Cluster Leader and a ASPS rep. During the year I also participated in an online Leaders meeting and another concerned with formulating STA policy priorities.

During these STA meetings the legal structure of scientific societies in Australia was raised. ASPS is currently a not-for-profit “Incorporated Society” registered in the ACT but there may be benefits from changing to a “Company Limited by Guarantee” structure as several other member organisations of STA are doing. The pros and cons of this idea, as well as other options, were discussed with our Public Officer John Evans and John will advise on the matter at a later date.

Each year STA organises their headline event called “Science Meets Parliament” during which politicians and parliamentarians are connected with science professionals to encourage communication and engagement between our national decision-makers and STEM practitioners. ASPS sponsored two early career scientists, Megan Sheldon and Benjamin Schwessinger, to attend this week-long event in 2022 which informed them about government and lobbying practices, provided them to media training and exposed them to high-level analyses of current issues from science leaders. It also facilitated direct meetings with members of parliament. The reports written by Megan and Benjamin are on our website. Those interested in participating in Science Meets Parliament next year should contact Kim Johnson and the new President.

CSIRO Publishing/Functional Plant Biology: Two meetings were held during the year with Sergey Shabala (Editor of FPB) and Marisa Spiniello (CSIRO Publishing) to negotiate closer ties between ASPS and FPB. The aim is to secure attractive publishing rights for ASPS members in FPB so that the status of FPB is enhanced to the benefit of us both. This would require changes to our current arrangements with the commercial journals  *Plants* and *International Journal of Molecular Sciences.* One draft proposal was received from CSIRO Publishing but neither Sergey nor myself considered it suitable. Discussions will continue.

Other Meetings: The International Congress on Plant Molecular Biology (IPMB) was planned for Cairns in 2021 but delayed due to Covid to October 2022. However, an extraordinary set of circumstances involving misunderstandings, ill-considered communications and knee-jerk responses on social media led to a social-media kerfuffle that finally led to its further delay, and almost total cancellation. ASPS was not involved in the organisation of this meeting but we were an official sponsor. As a result, we were drawn into the issue which occupied much of my time in February this year. Ros Gleadow (GPC) and Barry Pogson (Invited Speaker IPMB) and I joined a rolling series of meetings day and night with various participating parties including the executive and council members of IPMB in Australia and overseas, the President and other members of the American Society of Plant Biologists (employed to be conference organisers) and with other members of ASPS. It was a tense and difficult period involving strong differences of opinion around the important issue of power, diversity and inclusion at international meetings. One of the take-home messages from the experience is how critical it is to be polite and respectful when dealing with social media. I would like to thank the Communications team for alerting me to this issue and to Frances Sussmilch in particular for patiently counselling me on phenomenon that is social media. For those of you who would like more background to the issue I direct you to an ABC article which provides a well-balanced account.

https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2022-05-28/racial-controversy-diversity-inclusion-science-plant-congress/101041288

Changes to the constitution: At the AGM in 2021 I suggested small amendments to the ASPS constitution could be made to reflect modern communication options. For instance, meetings can be conducted virtually now and correspondence can occur online. The requirement for “prepaid postage” is thankfully past. Other proposed changes concern management of membership status and other administrative practices that either are no longer followed or that we now do routinely but which are not specifically mentioned in the document. The Executive have drafted some changes which will be distributed to members for discussion and vote at the AGM.

I am delighted and proud to have been ASPS President for these last two years. I am convinced that an active and vibrant Society provides many important benefits Australian plant science. It facilitates researchers to attend national and international meetings and to visit laboratories, it encourages interactions between early and later-career scientists in relaxed settings, it recognises excellence in research, culture and professional participation and instils a sense of belonging and excitement in a larger science fraternity. Society benefits from academic societies that can provide frank and fearless advice and from a knowledgeable population that demands evidence-based decision making from its leaders.

Finally, I would like to thank my Executive. Mike Haydon was my Treasurer throughout my term. He was supportive and full of common-sense advice on multiple issues, financial and otherwise. Kim Johnson, who joined the team last year as Secretary, has been a shot in the arm with her enthusiasm and willingness to help. Thank you both.

I commend the Report to the meeting.

Dr Peter R Ryan (President ASPS)