



The Royal Society of Western Australia

About RSWA

History of RSWA

Brief History of The Royal Society of Western Australia

Patron: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Vice Patrons: Her Excellency the Honourable Kerry Sanderson AC, Governor of Western Australia and Professor Lyn Beazley AO FTSE, WA Chief Scientist (2006-2013).

The Royal Society of Western Australia (RSWA) was established on 10 March 1914 under Royal assent granted by King George V, and remains today the only multi-disciplinary scientific society in the State.

The Royal Society of London

RSWA has its origin with The Royal Society of London which was founded in 1660 as “a Colledge for the Promoting of Physico-Mathematicall Experimentall Learning”. Through the patronage of King Charles II, the “Colledge” became the Royal Society. Under Royal Charter in 1663 the Society is referred to as “The Royal Society of London for improving natural knowledge”.

Royal Societies in Australia

In Australia, Royal Societies based in Science have been established in six states: Tasmania (founded 1843); New South Wales (origins from 1821, renamed with Royal Patronage 1866); Victoria (origins from 1854, renamed with Royal Patronage 1859); South Australia (origins from 1834 and 1853, renamed with Royal Patronage 1880); Queensland (origins from 1859, renamed with Royal Patronage 1885); and the youngest in Western Australia. The use of “Royal” without further qualification is confined to multi-disciplinary scientific bodies sharing the same purview as the Royal Society of London for “improving natural knowledge”. In 2007 The Royal Societies of Australia was founded as a national organisation to assist and represent the hundreds of members of Australia's Royal Societies with one voice in the interests of science, not only in Australia, but throughout the world.

Precursor Societies

Before RSWA was established in Western Australia, there were several precursor societies.

West Australian Natural History Society - 1890 to 1897

In 1890 the West Australian Natural History Society was founded under the Presidency of Sir John Forrest KCMG, the first Premier of Western Australia, who was a well known naturalist. The first paper was delivered by its energetic secretary Mr Bernard Woodward on the subject of distinguishing plants from animals. This period coincided with the opening of the then Geological Museum (now Western Australian Museum), an institution to which the subsequent RSWA would later become closely linked. The Natural History Society did not publish a journal, and did not survive beyond 1897 until the name was revived in 1903.

Mueller Botanical Society of Western Australia - 1897 to 1903

In 1897 a group of amateur botanists established the “Mueller Botanical Society of Western Australia”, again under the Presidency of Sir John Forrest KCMG. This society was named in honour of the renowned botanist Baron Ferdinand von Mueller. A number of places in the City of Subiaco were named after the Baron, including Mueller Park, Mueller Road (now Roberts Road), and Ferdinand Street (now Winthrop Avenue). The first issue of the “Journal and Proceedings of the Mueller Botanic Society” was edited by James Sykes Battye and published in September 1899. The first article was on “The History of Plant Life” by the President Mr EJ Bickford, F.L.S. In total there would be eleven journal issues with No. 11 in April 1903.

West Australian Natural History Society - 1903 to 1909

By 1903 the Mueller Botanical Society had broadened its interests to other aspects of natural history. The society name was changed to the “West Australian Natural History Society” with which is incorporated the Mueller Botanic Society. The newly named “Journal of the West Australian Natural History Society” published six parts of Volume 2, beginning with No. I in May 1904 and ending with No. VI in February 1909.

Natural History and Science Society of Western Australia - 1909 to 1914

In 1909, in recognition of sciences other than natural history, and in an attempt to broaden the society’s appeal, the name was changed to the “Natural History and Science Society of Western Australia”. The first President of the newly named society was Dr Frank Tratman, a keen natural historian who was a Doctor of Medicine, a member of the Medical Board of Western Australia, and president of the Dental Board of the colony. Journals under the new name were issued from Volume 3 No. 1 in 1910, No.2, in 1911, Volume 4 in 1912, to Volume 5 before the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

The Royal Society of Western Australia

In 1913 following a suggestion from Andrew Gibb Maitland, then Government Geologist, a motion was carried at a meeting held on 13 May “That the time has arrived for taking the necessary steps for altering the designation to ‘The Royal Society of Western Australia’ and for obtaining the Royal assent thereto; and that the matter be left in the hands of the Council”. Following a submission, assent for the Royal Charter was received by the Society from His Majesty via the Governor in a letter dated 18 November 1913.

On 10 March 1914, at the General Meeting of The Natural History and Science Society of Western Australia, on the motion of Mr M.A. Browne, it was resolved “That this Society be henceforth called The Royal Society of Western Australia” and the new Constitution (aka Rules) was adopted. Clause 2 of the Constitution read “The Royal Society of Western Australia is founded for the advancement of Science in all its branches”.

Royal Patronage

A petition to His Majesty King George V to act as Patron of the Society was granted via a letter dated 11 March 1914 from Government House, Perth. Now for over 100 years the Society has continued to enjoy Royal Patronage: After George V, who reigned until 1936, there was briefly Edward VIII who abdicated in December 1936, then George VI from 1936 to 1952, followed by Queen Elizabeth II since 1952.

Vice Patronages

Since 1914 Vice Patronage has been with successive Governors of the State of Western Australia.

In 2007 Council invited Professor Lyn Beazley, Chief Scientist of Western Australia, as an additional Vice Patron of the Society, a request that was graciously agreed to, and a position she kindly agreed extending after she retired from the position of WA Chief Scientist in 2013.

Incorporation

With consideration to the legal and operational benefits of being a corporate body, RSWA was incorporated 21 January 1937 under The Associations Incorporation Act 1895.

RSWA Journal and Proceedings

Volume I dated 1914-1915 of "Journal and Proceedings of The Royal Society of Western Australia" was published August 1915 with a price of five shillings. Printing of the first issue was by authority of Frederick WM Simpson, Government Printer. As an example of the truly multi-disciplinary nature of the Society, the first paper in Volume 1 is a mathematical contribution by one of the then Editors, M.A. Browne, entitled "The approximate summation of series, in which each term is a function of the corresponding term of an arithmetical progression".

At Volume XI the combined Journal and Proceedings of The Royal Society of Western Australia was divided into the Journal of The Royal Society of Western Australia and the Proceedings of The Royal Society of Western Australia. The Proceedings was essentially the newsletter of the Society containing at various times, notices of meetings, annual reports, financial statements, lists of members, announcements of new members, summaries of meetings, abstracts of monthly talks, and other items of interest to the membership.

For about eight decades the RSWA Journal was printed by the Government Printer. With the closure of the Government Print in the early 1990s, the Society had to find a new printer and this was provided by the Publications Department of the Western Australian Museum. To compensate for the loss of the subsidised printing provided by the Government Print, the State Government first through the Library of Western Australia, and then through the Department of Culture and the Arts, provided the Society with an annual printing subsidy of \$16,000 (excluding GST). This enabled the Society to maintain the quality of the Journal and distribute copies to Government Departments.

In early 2016, in an environment of State funding cutbacks, with the announced withdrawal of the annual grant from the Department of Culture and the Arts, together with the rising costs of printing and postage, the RSWA Council and Editorial Board, following trends in other societies, decided the Journal would in future be published only online. The advantages of the 'all online' format include more rapid publication of papers and the fact that colour illustrations (photos or diagrams) can be included without charge to authors. Volume 98 Part 2 in December 2015 was the last printed issue. Volume 99 Part 1 is the first entirely online issue.

As another sign of the times, given details of the Society and events are now available on the RSWA website and notified to members via email, electronic distribution of a newsletter (formerly known as Proceedings) is much less frequent and dependent on available time from volunteer members.

The Journal of The Royal Society of Western Australia has continued, for more than a century, a long distinguished history of valuable contributions to promoting and advancing science in Western Australia. The main three fields of endeavour in the Society have tended to be earth sciences, botany, and zoology. In detail, perusal of articles over the past few decades of the Journal reveals articles covering taxonomy, animal and plant physiology and ecology, palaeontology, mineral science, meteorites, structural geology, coastal geomorphology, stratigraphy, oceanography, archaeology, wetlands, evolution, petrology, genetics, radiometric dating, climate history and biogeography.

RSWA Library

Since 1960, through a written agreement with the then Director of the Western Australian Museum, WDL Ride (President 1962-1963), the RSWA Library has been held in trust by the Library of the Western Australian Museum. Moreover, from that time, the Museum's Librarian became de facto Honorary Librarian of the RSWA. Originally, the RSWA Library was held in Perth, however in 2004 with the imminent closure of the Museum's Francis Street building, the library was moved to the Museum's Research and Collections facility at 49 Kew Street, Welshpool. During her tenure as Honorary Librarian (1987-2012), Margaret Triffit brought the RSWA library and Museum's own library into the electronic age.

The RSWA Library is an important collection of specialist books, journals and other scientific publications. The great majority of the titles have been obtained by exchange for the JRSWA, and some are unique holdings in the State. The Library also contains more than a hundred monographs published prior to 1900, many acquired by donation. The titles include several rare publications on early voyages to Australia, and the botany of Australia. Overall there are more than 350 books and 980 journal titles of which more than 200 are current. In 2000, a combined WA Museum and RSWA Library Catalog was released on CD-Rom including fully searchable records for over 18,000 monographs, 2,700 journal titles and 2,200 indexed reprints/articles on molluscs, many published more than 50 years ago. The RSWA Library has benefited with exchanges and links to more than 150 libraries from over 30 countries around the world. Today catalogues of the RSWA publication collection (along with the Museum's own holdings) are available on line through the WA Museum's website (<http://library-srv.museum.wa.gov.au/menu.htm>). Borrowing from the Library is restricted to Museum staff. The RSWA Library is available to the public for reference and research, and articles may be photocopied. The Library can be accessed by prior appointment with the Librarian.

Submissions, Lobbying and Representations

As detailed in an article by S Griffin & V Semeniuk, during its history the RSWA has contributed in the arena of submissions, lobbying and representations eg:-

- 1963 the Society was successful in instigating a survey of Aboriginal art on Depuch Island (in recognition of the importance of indigenous culture)
- 1967, the Society persuaded the Swan River Board to enlist a biologist, and revised the Report on National Parks and Nature Reserves in Western Australia
- 1969, the Society was requested by the Metropolitan Regional Planning Authority to assist in assessing natural resources and heritage buildings, and to advise on matters of public interest
- 1970, the Society lobbied the State Government regarding the possible biological consequences of a nuclear explosion as part of a north-west harbour development, the protection of flora and fauna reserves from mining; the consequences of industrial and agricultural expansion around the Peel Inlet, Harvey Estuary, Swan Estuary and coastal waters; and the biological importance and the need to preserve the lakes and swamps of the Swan Coastal Plain
- 1971, the Society contributed to the Corridor Plan for Perth
- 1972, the Society made a submission to the Commonwealth Committee on Public Works requesting that the Garden Island naval developments be restricted to one part of the island only
- 1973, the Society recommended the establishment of a Research Foundation, whose aim would be to support scientific research.
- 1974, a submission was made to the Committee of Enquiry into the National Estate, stressing the role of the Society as an unbiased and inter-disciplinary body concerned with the conservation of nature and natural reserves
- 1977, the increasing pressure on jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) as a timber resource, was recognised through a Jarrah Forest Symposium
- 1981, the Society prepared a submission to the EPA regarding the System Six Report dealing with land-use and reserves in the Perth region
- 1989, the Society made representations to the State Government over the proposed closure of the Bickley Observatory
- 1992, it made representations to the State Government over the splitting of the Environmental Protection Authority into two bodies
- 1993, it made representations to a State Government Agency over an alleged case of unfair discrimination.
- The Royal Society has made valuable contributions to the National Trust in having a representative on the Council of the Trust, dealing with issues of preservation and conservation

Medal of The Royal Society of Western Australia

In 1924, the Medal of the RSWA was inaugurated to mark the centenary of the birth of Lord Kelvin on 26 June 1824. The medal was instituted as an award for outstanding work in science, and it was to be known as the Royal Society's Medal or, more formally, the Medal of The Royal Society of Western Australia. Because the medal bears the image of Lord Kelvin on its obverse side it has sometimes been referred to incorrectly as the 'Kelvin Medal'. In accordance with the RSWA Constitution, the Medal shall be awarded every fourth year or at such other times or periods as the Council may from time to time decide for distinguished work in science connected with Western Australia. There have been 24 distinguished recipients of the Medal from 1924 to 2010. In 1979 there were three recipients of the medal.

Student Medals

In March 1997 Council discussed the creation of Royal Society Top Student Science Medals for Perth's four public universities. In 1998 the RSWA inaugurated Student Medals to be awarded every year at its Annual General Meeting to those science students from each of Perth's universities nominated by them as the most outstanding in Natural and Earth Sciences. Initially medals were awarded to students from The University of Western Australia, Murdoch University, Curtin University, and Edith Cowan University. The University of Notre Dame Australia was included later. Student Medals were first awarded at the Society's Annual General Meeting on 20 July 1998.

Doug Clarke Medal

In 2008, Council resolved to honour the life of Doug Clarke by initiating 'The Doug Clarke Education Advocacy Award Medal' of the Society. This award recognises the outstanding contribution to science education made by Doug Clarke from Murdoch University. Clarke performed hundreds of chemistry shows at schools and regularly appeared on television. He inspired thousands of school children in the wonders of science, and assisted undergraduates and postgraduates. The inaugural award was presented to Doug Clarke at the Annual General Meeting of the Society in 2008.

Membership

The first published list of members of the RSWA in Volume I of the Journal showed 7 Honorary Members, 51 Ordinary Members and 27 Associate Members, a total of 85 members. By July 1916 the total membership had increased to 96, including two new categories, Corresponding Members, and the Society's first Student Member, Stephen King Montgomery BA(Hons), BSc(Hons), MB, BS(Lond), MD(Lond), DR (Edin) (1895-1950) who achieved a life of scientific eminence. By June 1924 the Society had 253 members. While neither the RSWA nor its forerunner societies ever required that members had special academic qualifications, the membership at that time included many working scientists, the Chief Justice and other members of the judiciary, 4 politicians, 7 university professors, 13 medical practitioners, the Director of Education, the Director of Agriculture, and many prominent businessmen of the day. By 1965 the membership had stabilised at 246. Following a number of initiatives, by June 2000 the membership had risen to 408. By June 2016 membership was 166 members. Continuing efforts are being made to regrow the membership.

The Future

The History, Roles and Future of The Royal Society of Western Australia is well documented in more detail in articles by S Griffin & V Semeniuk in RSWA Journal 81, and by AWR Bevan in RSWA Journal 97. Whilst the role of the Society has changed over the past 100 years, these comments from 1998 continue to be apt: "The future of the Society, as well as our social and economic well-being, may depend on how well science is communicated, understood, and respected" and "The future role of the Society, therefore, lies in a more focused pursuit in the advancement of science to create respect for and understanding of the usefulness of science".

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