

## “Simply the best” – AMSA/NZMSS 2024

a personal retrospective on the Society's most recent annual conference, with the Aussie anthem title brought to mind by the opening of *Tina Turner - the Musical* in Melbourne, where my wife and I spent five days on our way back from Hobart.

AMSA/NZMSS 2024, the four-yearly joint annual conference of Australia's two marine science societies, was held in Hobart (Nipaluna), Tasmania during 15-19<sup>th</sup> September. It was certainly the biggest conference in NZMSS's 64-year history. Whether it was “better than all the rest” is difficult to say even for someone with experience of some 47 annual NZMSS conferences, including four that were held jointly with AMSA (which could have been five if Covid had not cancelled out Sydney in 2020). Without doubt, Joel Williams from the University of Tasmania, and his organizing and scientific committees, with the support of ASN Events professional management, had done an amazing job of putting together a conference ‘program’ that accommodated both the huge number of presentations offered by over 850 delegates, and the attendance of well over 900 people when all the trade display contributors were included. New Zealand was apparently represented by around 120 delegates.

The theme for AMSA/NZMSS 2024 was ‘Navigating Uncertainty for a Future Sustainable Ocean’ – a concept broad enough to cover the usual extensive range of topics discussed at each and every NZMSS annual conference. The programme for the four full days of conference proceedings encompassed plenaries, standard (12 minutes and questions) and speed (6 minutes and no questions) presentations, as well as pre- and post-conference workshops. The accompanying trade show was evidence of a high level of support for marine science in Australia from federal, state and NGO organisations, backed up by numerous commercial enterprises promoting a diverse range of equipment for looking at, examining and recording the marine environment. The multiplicity of items available to drop into the oceans (and retrieve) was astounding! The trade show and poster displays were well-patronized (networked?) during tea/coffee breaks and lunchtime, when the hotel caterers managed - to my great surprise - to easily and efficiently ‘feed and water’ the 900 attendees, within the half or one-hour breaks from proceedings. And the food was both delicious and plentiful!

The hundreds of papers submitted for AMSA/NZMSS 2024 required five concurrent sessions of presentations, as well as a large display of posters. One of the five sessions throughout the whole conference was devoted entirely to indigenous contributions and workshops. There was also a noticeable focus throughout the conference on recognition and acknowledgement of ‘*the traditional custodians of the lands, seas, waterways and skies on which we live, work and play*’, with respect frequently paid by the speakers to ‘*elders past and present*’.

AMSA/NZMSS 2024 was held at the Hotel Grand Chancellor over-looking Victoria Dock in downtown Hobart. The hotel, with its 1100 seat Federation Concert Hall, was perhaps the only venue capable of accommodating the potentially huge plenary sessions, together with well-appointed break-out rooms for the five concurrent sessions of scientific presentations. I was pleased to find that my own paper was scheduled on Day One of proceedings – getting

it out of the way early to allow full enjoyment of the rest of the conference. My paper was part of the symposium on “Aquaculture in a Changing World: Production, Regeneration, Sustainability and the Environment”. To attempt to discuss 50 years of use of Kaitaia spat in the mussel farming industry, and to question its future sustainability, in a six-minute speed talk was maybe overly optimistic. But “*Kaitaia spat – fifty years of seed supply for New Zealand’s farmed mussel production but is it sustainable for another fifty? Environmental considerations and alternatives*” was my attempt to do so. Hopefully my audience retained at least one or two ‘take home points’ from what I am expecting to be my valedictory address to a marine science audience – though not necessarily my last attendance at an NZMSS conference.

Two novel features of this particular gathering were, firstly, the childcare programme that operated throughout all four days of the conference *to facilitate balancing your professional commitments with your family responsibilities*, and secondly ‘The Great Debate – Australia versus New Zealand; who is better - under the waterline?’ This plenary session provided some light relief, and considerable hilarity, half-way through the conference, with NZMSS’s team of Jerusha Bennett, Alice Rogers and Shane Lavery coming out on top, as measured by the volume of laughter and applause.

One perhaps not so novel feature was the choice of venue for the Gala Dinner which capped off the conference. “The Hanging Gardens”, was an open air, live music, beer garden on a cold and windy night in downtown Hobart! The occasion was saved from disaster by the large number of post-conference revelers being able to huddle together penguin-style for collective warmth, or lucky enough to have access to one of the braziers providing heat, but having to risk losing one’s place at the fire to make forays to the smorgasbords loaded with food and beverages. Things warmed up later in the nightclub on the upper floor!

So what will I particularly remember from AMSA/NZMSS 2024? The size of the meeting was pretty overwhelming; the quality of the papers and posters showed even more diversity than usual (but why so much interest in seagrass?); the high level of indigenous input throughout proceedings was enlightening; the infrastructure and running of everything about the conference was almost faultless. If I had to suggest a fault it would be with the conference app. It did not allow horizontal comparison across the five concurrent streams of the ‘program’; a problem resolved by the organisers printing and displaying an A1 copy of each day’s schedule for the digitally less savvy delegates, such as myself, to view (but thereby exposing a glitch in the conference’s aim to be paper-free!). I enjoyed listening to Chris Battershill’s exposay of his career and achievements, in his plenary address as recipient of the NZMSS Lifetime Achievement Award for 2023, and I was delighted to see Abby Smith accept the 2024 Award, in recognition of her many years work on bryozoans, shells and sedimentology, in mentoring students, and perhaps for her knitting skills!

It's going to be a short year until the next NZMSS annual conference in Blenheim in early July 2025, but heaven help the organizers if another 900 delegates want to attend that one!

Bob Hickman, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2024