

Words For APPEA And PESA

The APPEA meeting in Brisbane this month is the 50th anniversary of the APPEA Conference. The men and women who have run APPEA and its predecessor APEA over those years, and the companies who have funded it, deserve our thanks.

Representing the oil exploration and producing industry is not an easy task. Perhaps it never was: those who wrestled with Canberra during the Connor era would agree with that. However, the change in public perceptions of business and the environment in recent decades make it a more complex task these days. Ironically, those changed perceptions are underpinned by a national affluence that owes no small measure to APPEA members!

There is also the challenge of balancing the tension within APPEA itself, the interests of the large companies and those of the smaller members. But that was there in the earliest days too, and will continue. Both the large and the small are needed, and the exchange between them of ideas and people is part of the creative dynamic of the industry.

One of the most important contributions by APPEA, to use the term in its real meaning—the associated members—has been the annual conference, the presentation of papers and the publication of those proceedings¹. An equally impressive contribution has come in recent decades from the PESA conferences, focused alternatively on the Western and Eastern Australian basins.

Robyn and I have been talking lately about the millions of words that have gone into those APPEA and PESA publications over the years. There were several reasons for those conversations, mostly over wine in Perth late-summer evenings, our favourite time of the year. Robyn was fussing with drafts of the paper she was co-authoring for APPEA. I was working on Dampier Sub-basin and Timor Leste projects and updating our North West Shelf map (unashamed self-advertising there), and my desk was constantly half buried in APPEA and PESA volumes.

Inevitably, we reminisced about our role in several of the volumes and how that all started with the 1984 PESA Canning Basin symposium.

Robyn and I were away from Australia for most of the 1970s and, on returning, we looked to APEA and PESA publications to reacquaint us with Australian exploration, especially in the Canning and Perth basins. The technical material was excellent, but we thought it deserved more professional compilation and presentation.

The Canning Basin volume was our vehicle to introduce that change. Jaap Poll, the force behind the symposium, asked me to be chairman and then found himself embarrassed because Elwood Horstman, his first choice, belatedly accepted. I told Jaap I didn't want to be chairman; I wanted to do the proceedings volume.

The original budget didn't run to a hard cover but we blinked that at the beginning and, as our authors' roll-call grew and attendee commitments swelled, we finally dragged the budget from Elwood and his committee.

We enjoyed remembering how, on the night of the post-conference dinner, I had one of those overheard-in-the-toilet moments, having come through the doorway as a prominent PESA member proffered from the urinal to the relieved PESA member beside him, "I hope we don't have to produce a book like that every conference". While that was very definitely the idea, it seemed appropriate to just withdraw discreetly.

The many authors who contributed to those volumes were very much in our musings. I had been introduced in early April to a young Indian geologist recently assigned to work on the North West Shelf. He shook my hand and gushed his joy at meeting one of the 'authors' of all those books. I was very happy to explain to him that the real credits are due to the authors.

We have been fortunate to have a generation of very productive and creative geoscientists dominating our publications since the 1980s. Some of them produced paper after paper. These include industry people such as John Gorter, Larry Tilbury, Peter Barber and Grant Ellis, for example. BMR/GA people such as Geoff O'Brien, Marita and John Bradshaw, and Jane Blevin. WA Survey people such as Arthur Mory and Roger Hocking. Many others. Lists always leave people out and I mean no offense to those not mentioned.

Others wrote less frequently but provided exceptional papers: for example, David Sibley's pantheon of AVO anomalies and Noel Newell's Bonaparte water-washing, both in APPEA 1999. Or Karen Tindale's Exmouth Sub-basin review in WABS 2. These papers are used daily by petroleum explorers.

We were also talking of these authors because we had learnt, somewhat belatedly, that WABS 4 had been postponed, perhaps not indefinitely, but certainly for the foreseeable future. That is an unfortunate development.

Most of those authors I have mentioned, with a few exceptions, are relatively late in their

careers. Where is the next generation? To whom do we pass the pens?

There is a task, a duty, here for APPEA companies. The writing of papers for APPEA and PESA (and other) journals needs management support. Invariably these days, when I ask geologists about writing a paper, I am told that everyone is too busy, that 'management' will not make any company time available and the work will all be personal time.

Report writing is an essential discipline for a geoscientist because it requires organisation of thought and clear expression of the concepts and results. It is part of the scientific process. Not everyone wants to write papers, of course, but all should be encouraged in the skill, and those who are interested should be supported in the practice.

Time was, the junior geo wrote a well report or a seismic interpretation report, and submitted it to the Chief Geo or Exploration Manager, and they went through it thoroughly, checking the content of the introduction, red-lining the items missed or wrongly emphasised in the discussion, and advising on the proper balance in the conclusions. This was a great learning process.

Today, too many reports are PowerPoint slides, often without notes, and well completion reports are written by contract writers.

Time was, also, when the APPEA Best Paper Award was as sought after for corporate pride as the safety or environmental award. Our industry and our endeavour would profit from a renewed commitment to that ethic.

I know it hasn't gone away. Woodside's Larry Tilbury won the Best Paper Award last year for his Pluto paper. I hope Woodside management was as pleased as Larry. I see an Inpex paper on Ichthys this year.

This is a plea to APPEA members on their 50th anniversary to continue and expand that effort. Confidentiality is important to commercial success in our industry, but so is communication among the geoscientists whose knowledge and creativity is at its core.

Sometimes editors are honoured for publications. We would do well to remember on such occasions that it is really words that are being honoured; words that the editors may have helped with spit and polish but, ultimately, words that authors, be they poets or petrophysicists, offer to others as a step in the process of discovery.

Peter Purcell

¹ I continue to regret APPEA's decision to stop publishing the Journal. It may be a generational issue, but a CD isn't the same as a book in your hand.