DEFOLIATION MANAGEMENT OF
BIRDSFOOT TREFOIL (*Lotus corniculatus* L.)

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
Institute of Natural Resources, Massey University, New Zealand

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2001
This Thesis is dedicated to my wife Rossy, and our daughters Agustina and Bianca
for their love, help and support
ABSTRACT


Birdsfoot trefoil (Lotus corniculatus L.) is a forage legume widely cultivated around the world, adapted to grow on infertile, drought-prone or acid soils, and with a high feeding value and bloat safe forage. However, its persistence is poor, limited by the management of defoliation and disease incidence. Adjustments in defoliation strategies, reproductive processes and population dynamics are seen as alternatives to increase production and persistence of birdsfoot trefoil swards. The objectives of this research were to determine appropriate defoliation strategies for different birdsfoot trefoil cultivars, in terms of the frequency, intensity and timing of defoliation, and to quantify morphological and physiological adaptations and population changes in response to defoliation. A series of three field and one glasshouse experiments were conducted in Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand (latitude 40°23'S) and INIA Treinta y Tres, Uruguay (latitude 33°54'S) from 1997 to 2000. The cultivars evaluated were San Gabriel (Brazil), INIA Draco (Uruguay), Grasslands Goldie (New Zealand) and Steadfast (USA). Management varied in intensity of defoliation from 2 to 10 cm height, in frequency from 20 to 40 days, and in timing the start of defoliation in the first year from vegetative to late mature stages. Also, combinations of rest periods in autumn, winter and summer were studied on pure and mixed birdsfoot trefoil swards.

A preliminary short term study with Grasslands Goldie in New Zealand, showed that hard defoliation (2 cm) in spring reduced birdsfoot trefoil spring production (17%) and plant population (21%) compared with the average of laxer defoliation (6 and 10 cm). Root mass, crown mass, primary and total number of shoots/m² and root reserves were all reduced under hard defoliation. Early autumn rest (last cut in April) improved plant root reserves and increased spring herbage production (17%). The effects of intensity of defoliation were confirmed under controlled glasshouse conditions, where lax regimes
(6 and 10 cm) increased herbage production over intensive defoliation (2 cm) when defoliated at 20 day intervals. In spring, intensive and frequent defoliation (2 cm-20 days) reduced production and plant survival, and lax and less frequent defoliation (10 cm-40 days) resulted in herbage losses by excessive accumulation. Limited and short term plant adjustments in relative growth rate, leaf area, specific leaf area and number of leaves per plant were not enough to compensate for the excessive loss of plant tissues under severe defoliation (2 cm). The effects of defoliation intensity increased over time, reducing crown size, root mass, root diameter and root reserves of birdsfoot trefoil plants.

Cultivars evaluated in a two years study in Uruguay differed in plant habit (from semi-prostrate to erect types), winter activity (active and dormant types) and morphology. The presence of rhizomes in cv. Steadfast was observed in 17% of individual plants tested. Cultivars San Gabriel and INIA Draco were 2.6 and 2.5 times more productive than introductions from New Zealand and USA in the first and second year respectively. The group of cultivars tested showed adequate standards of forage quality, varying from 590-720 g/kg DM for digestibility of organic matter, 25-39 g/kg DM for nitrogen, 230-400 g/kg DM for acid detergent fibre and 22-31 g/kg DM for condensed tannins. In contrast with previous results, herbage production was higher for plots defoliated at 4 cm height than at 8 cm during the first year and there were no differences in the second year. Contrasts with previous experiments were attributable to an extended defoliation interval (40 days) and rest periods of approximately 6 months in the year that allowed plants to rebuild enough reserves for successive regrowths.

When growing in competition with white clover, birdsfoot trefoil production was improved by autumn rest and lax grazing (10 cm). Plant density was reduced by intensive grazing (4 cm) and by strategies that grazed swards between 9 and 12 times a year compared with those where grazing was 6 times a year. Summer spelling increased seed production of birdsfoot trefoil, achieving 11,110 viable seeds/m² if a winter rest was also used. However, seedling emergence from soil seed reserves was only between 5-13% under grazing conditions during autumn and winter, demanding additional management practices to increase recruitment of new individuals.
Abstract

The results of these studies were used to define practical management strategies to optimise the production and persistence of birdsfoot trefoil swards, and plant characteristics appropriate to Uruguayan and New Zealand conditions.

Keywords: Lotus corniculatus L.; birdsfoot trefoil; cultivars; defoliation management; forage production; nutritive value; persistence; plant morphology; carbohydrate root reserves; seed production; soil seed reserves; seedling emergence.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people that I would like to express my gratitude for their support and contribution to the completion of this project.

I wish to thank sincerely to my chief supervisor, Professor John Hodgson (Institute of Natural Resources, Massey University) for his continuous encouragement, guidance and support over these years, providing a fertile environment of discussions and development of research skills. His accurate supervision from the start to the end, made possible to organize a split Ph.D program between New Zealand and Uruguay, and contributed to extend more the research links between both countries.

Special thanks to my co-supervisor, Dr. Peter Kemp (Institute of Natural Resources, Massey University) for provides always constructive comments, guidance and patience throughout this study. His fine sense of humor made always the difference between peaks of frustration and motivation.

My particular appreciation to my co-supervisors, Professor Ing. Agr. Milton Carámbula (National Institute of Agricultural Research of Uruguay) and Ing. Agr. Diego Risso (Head of Pastures Program of the National Institute of Agricultural Research of Uruguay), for their generous help and suggestions particularly over the trials ran in Uruguay, making this study productive.

I am extremely grateful to the National Institute of Agricultural Research of Uruguay for the support, research facilities and financial assistance, especially to the following members: Mr. J.P. Hounie and Ing. Agr. P. Bonino (past and present presidents of the INIA Board and in their name to the other Board members), Dr. E. Indarte (National Director), Dr. G. Cerizola (Human Resources) and Ing. Agr. H. Duran (Leader of Animal Production group). To Dr. F. Montossi (Head of Sheep Program of the National Institute of Agricultural Research of Uruguay) for his encouragement and help in many stages of this project.
I would like to express my recognition to New Zealand, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) for provision of financial support by a NZODA scholarship. My gratitude to Mr. Mac Herrera, consul of New Zealand in Uruguay, who provided early arrangements for this scholarship. Also to the staff of the International Students Office in Massey University for the assistance provided to me and my family.

My thanks to the staff of Natural Resources Institute, and particularly to Pastoral Science Group at Massey University for their friendship and support over these years. The assistance and invaluable criticism provided by Dr. C. Matthew, Mr P. Matthews and Dr I. Valentine in different stages are well recognized. In particular, to Mr M. Alexander, Mr R. Dissanayake, Ms K. Hamilton, Ms H. Kennedy, R. Levy, I. Manley, Mr M. Osborne and others. Also to the staff of the Plant Growth Unit, Mr C. Johnstone, L. Taylor, L. Sylva and H. Logan, and late Charlie Howell of Deer Research Unit of Massey University. Very special thanks to Dr D. Woolley and Mr C. Rawlingson for provide assistance to conduct the root carbohydrate analysis.

My recognition to those people that provided seeds of evaluated cultivars, to Dr. W. Williams (Agresearch, Palmerston North, New Zealand), to Dr P. Beuselinck (USDA-ARS, Columbia, Missouri, USA) and Ing. Agr. J. Bologna (Agronomy Faculty, Uruguay).

My sincere thanks to Ing. Agr L. Helguera and Ing. Agr. G. Zorrilla, past and present Directors of INIA Treinta y Tres, to provide the best technical and human conditions to execute this project. To the staff of the “old” Estación Experimental del Este (INIA Treinta y Tres Research Station, Uruguay) for their assistance, warm support and encouragement to achieve this goal.

I would like to acknowledge the generous field and laboratory assistance given by Mr C. Carmona, Mr G. Ferreira, Mr J. Jackson and Mr N. Serron of Pastures Group of INIA Treinta y Tres, during the trials conducted in Uruguay. Their attention and accuracy during many hours that we shared running these experiments will be never forgotten. Many thanks goes to my colleague of Pastures group Ing. Agr. R. Bermúdez,
that gave me unconditional assistance. Thanks to the students Mr. C. Machado and Mr. I. Nuñez from the Agronomy Faculty of Uruguay, who co-laboured with me collecting and sharing information.

The friendship and encouragement of my fellow graduate students at Massey University provided an excellent environment, especially to Dr. S. Assuero, Dr. S. Bluett, Mr. W. Beskow, Mrs. R. Briant, Mr D. Cabrera, Ms. D. Carvalho, Dr. N. Devkota, Mrs M. Ercolin, Dr. A. Guevara, Mr. C. Hepp, Mr. F. Hughes, Mr. and Mrs. Laborde, Dr. G. Li, Mrs. H. Logan, Dr. I. Lopez, Dr. Z. Nie, Dr. S. Oppong, Dr. C. Poli, Dr. D. Real, Mrs C. Realini, Mr. A. Romera, Mr. J. Rossi, Mrs P. Salles, Mr. T. Pande, Mr. A. Wall and others.

My sincere thanks to my parents and sister for their education, support and continuous encouragement from early steps at the primary school (Escuela Rural No. 84 de Molles de Gutierrez, Lavalleja, Uruguay) to nowadays. The support of our friends, in special to my relations in Uruguay, is greatly appreciated.

Finally I want to express my gratitude to my wife Rossy and daughters Agustina and Bianca. Their technical help, tolerance, sacrifice and motivation throughout these “long and hard” years, accepting the challenge to complete this project, contributed to make this study successful.

Walter Ayala
April 5, 2001
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