

sixty not out



Last year marked the Fitztitute's 60th anniversary. The Fitz was established in 1960 by Cecily Niven to commemorate her father, Sir Percy FitzPatrick, with the dual mission of conducting ornithological research and providing a repository for ornithological literature in the Niven Library. The Fitz's incorporation into the University of Cape Town in 1973 saw a broadening of its role to include post-graduate education. Since then, more than 450 students have received masters or doctoral degrees through the Fitz.

From its modest beginnings, the Fitztitute has grown to become a leading ornithological and conservation research institute. There have been numerous milestones along the way, but two in particular have played a key role in shaping the current establishment. The first was the decision in 1989 to broaden the Fitz's teaching remit to include the then fledgling science of conservation biology. This resulted in the development of the conservation biology masters' programme, which has seen more than 300 students graduate since its inception in 1992. Many of these students have gone on to play important roles in conservation organisations all over the world.

above Marina Niven sits front and centre in the group photo at the Fitztitute's 60th anniversary AGM, held just before the Covid lockdown.

The second was the recognition of the Fitz as a Centre of Excellence in 'Birds as Keys to Biodiversity Conservation' by the National Research Foundation in 2004. This brought much-needed funding at a time when national research funding was shrinking and it forged strong links with ornithological researchers at other institutions in South Africa. It also sharpened our focus on conservation-related research and pushed us to publish our findings in high-impact international journals. This helped the University of Cape Town be listed as the joint third most influential university in the world for ornithology in 2017.

All six Centres of Excellence recognised in the first round of awards in 2004 have gone on to become extremely successful and the funding model was expanded to develop additional centres. Funding is awarded for five years, with extensions linked to performance. 2019 was the final year of the third tranche of funding for the Fitz and there was considerable debate regarding the fate of the initial cohort of centres from 2020 onwards. Finally, in November 2019 we were told that funding would continue at 2019 levels for a further three years, during which time the centres would be assisted to develop alternative funding models.

Then the Covid-19 pandemic struck, crippling the South African economy and slashing government budgets. We lost all

government funding for SABAP2 and the other citizen science projects inherited from the Animal Demography Unit, and in August 2020 we were told that the Centre of Excellence funding would be phased out from 2020 to 2022, with the budget being cut by one quarter each year. That would have been fine if we hadn't already spent three-quarters of the 2020 budget.

Compared to the other centres, the Fitz is fortunate. Most of our core staff costs are carried by the University of Cape Town, so the institute will continue. We even have enough reserves to cover most of the shortfall in the budget and generous support from a wide range of donors has gone a long way to saving SABAP2. But inevitably we'll see a contraction in student numbers and probably a decrease in other research outputs as we transition to other sources of research funding.

The Covid pandemic had some short-term benefits for nature, thanks to reduced pollution and human disturbance, but the long-term consequences for conservation and conservation research through decreased funding are dire. We can only hope for a speedy economic recovery that will allow governments to greatly increase their support for conservation. This is crucial, given the world's failure to meet any of the 20 Aichi biodiversity targets set for the past decade. At a more local scale, I hope that the lockdown-inspired increased appreciation of nature and reduction in travel will translate into people leading more sustainable lifestyles. Let's make it a truly green recovery.

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