50th ANNIVERSARY 1960–2010

NEWS FROM THE **PERCY FITZPATRICK INSTITUTE**

# *The rise of conservation biology*

The Fitztitute was founded in a very turbulent year of South Africa's history. In February 1960, Harold Macmillan delivered his 'Wind of Change' speech to the South African parliament in Cape Town. In March, 69 people were killed at Sharpeville and a state of emergency was declared. The following month, the ANC and PAC were banned and by the end of the year South Africa had severed its last ties with the British monarchy and declared itself a republic.

Harold Macmillan may have presaged the wind of political change as far back as 1960, but by the 1980s the Fitztitute realised that the wind of environmental change required us to rethink our priorities. It was time to take greater cognisance of real-world issues and how we might assist in addressing them. Even then, it did not take a rocket scientist to realise that global biodiversity hotspots (of which South Africa has three) and the world's conservation scientists were literally in very different places. In Africa, the only continent that supports a reasonably intact megafauna, we were woefully short of conservation biologists and facing the challenge of developing an intellectual capacity that could direct conservation efforts in Africa into the future. To meet this challenge, in the 1980s the Fitztitute began to invest increasing resources into the emerging discipline of conservation biology. This proved to be a wise decision, not least because South Africa's human population increased by nearly 60 per cent between 1981 and 2003 – a scary statistic.

Conservation biology really is a new science: the first seminal textbook was written as recently as 1986, 127 years after Darwin wrote *On the Origin of Species*. The growing need to train conservation biologists in Africa sparked our determination to be part of a solution to the mismatch of skills and needs. Eighteen years ago, in 1992, the first cohort of Conservation Biology Masters students walked through the doors of the Institute. To date, more than 200 students have completed the conservation biology course, and some 85 per cent of them are now employed in the conservation field, many holding top national or international positions. The course, the most successful of its kind in Africa and one with a global reputation, attracts both national and international students and is taught by experts from the University of Cape Town (UCT) and further afield.

PHIL HOCKEY

*The 2010 Conservation Biology students at work in their new lab.*

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Our activities in the conservation biology arena were greatly strengthened in 2006 when a generous private endowment allowed us to appoint Graeme Cumming as the Pola Pasvolsky Chair in Conservation Biology. Since then, new elements have been added to the Masters course and the diversity of bird conservation projects that we are tackling has mushroomed. These include developing mitigation measures for threatened seabirds in the Southern Ocean; exploring factors that promote the spread of diseases carried by birds; and developing strategies for the conservation of threatened terrestrial birds such as Cape Parrots, Ludwig's Bustards and Southern Ground-Hornbills.

In the mid-1980s conservationist David Bellamy wrote that a major code of our civilisation has become the right of people to destroy the self-sustaining diversity of nature and to send other products of the evolutionary process to the wall of extinction.

He penned these words in the introduction to a book by Norman Myers, who was recently voted by *Time* magazine as one of the 50 most influential environmentalists on the planet. We are happy to report that for the past 15 years Myers has been integrally involved with our Conservation Biology students, who this year are enjoying the comforts of a new teaching lab, refurbished by UCT, and a bank of new computers, generously donated by The Nature Conservation Corporation. We have come a long way in the field of conservation biology – and we're going a long way too!

If you would like to be part of our 50th Anniversary celebrations and our bursary and research fund-raising drives, please contact the Institute's Director, Prof. Phil Hockey, Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, South Africa 7701. E-mail ***phil.hockey@uct.ac.za***, fax +27 (0)21 650 3295, tel. +27 (0)21 650 3290/1 or visit ***www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za***