

THE winds OF change

The start of 2023 saw two major changes at the Fitz. Firstly, funding for the Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Birds as Keys to Biodiversity Conservation came to an end. The Fitz was one of six centres recognised in the first round of awards made in 2004. Initially only part-funded, the Fitz CoE was upgraded to full funding – amounting to some R5-million to R7-million per year – from 2009, following a favourable review by a panel of eminent assessors after the first five-year phase.

The intention was for the centres to run for only 10 years, but the initial cohort all proved so successful that funding was extended beyond three five-year terms. It was only in 2020, at the height of the Covid financial crunch, that the decision was made to phase out support for the initial set of CoEs. Funding came to an end in March 2023 and final reporting will be concluded by September this year.

Fortunately, the loss of CoE funding will not have a dramatic impact on the activities of the Fitz. Over the past decade, the funding accounted for roughly a third of the Fitz's annual budget and, unlike the other centres, most staff costs were independent of CoE funding. However, the phased reduction in CoE funding since 2020 has already seen a decrease in the number of students, especially post-doctoral fellows, and we are currently exploring new funding streams to offset these losses.

But the Fitz CoE was broader than just the team based at the University of Cape Town. CoE funding was used to support ornithological and conservation research at Pretoria, Wits



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and Nelson Mandela universities, as well as to help support international collaborations with researchers from across the globe. I am confident that the close linkages forged through the CoE will continue; we shall just need to be more creative in sourcing funds to ensure they do so.

Secondly, I retired as director of the Fitz at the end of 2022, after a decade in that role. I will remain a member of the Fitz as an emeritus professor at UCT, which will give me more time for my own research and enable me to spend more time in the field. It is widely known that I was reluctant to take on the directorship following Phil Hockey's untimely death at the beginning of 2013 and I believe that it is time for a new, more strategic director to take the helm.

At the time of writing, the process of appointing a new director is ongoing. All three candidates interviewed are well known to the Fitz and all have the credentials and ability to fill the post, so the Institute will be in good hands irrespective of who is selected. In the interim, Claire Spottiswoode is acting director and we couldn't ask for a more dedicated or capable person in the role.

Peter celebrated stepping down as director of the Fitz by lecturing on a series of cruises to the sub-Antarctic islands south of New Zealand. Here his interview on Macquarie Island was disrupted by an overly friendly southern elephant seal pup.

Leadership is tricky. You need a clear vision of where the institute is going and a plan for how to get it there, but you also need to be sensitive to the aspirations of the staff and students to bring out the best in every member of the team. I wish the new director every success in balancing these goals.

I thank my colleagues – staff and students alike – for their support during my tenure as director. Their dedication and enthusiasm made it easy for me to maintain the Fitz's reputation as a leading ornithological research centre.

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