



GABRIEL JAMIE & CLAIRE SPOTTISWOODE



JACQUELINE BISHOP

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE YEAR

As 2023 draws to a close, it's an opportune time to reflect on the past year at the Fitz.

This has been a year of change at the Fitz, with longstanding director Professor Peter Ryan retiring and Associate Professor Susie Cunningham being appointed in his place, and Dr Sally Hofmeyr taking over as the new convenor for the Master's course in Conservation Biology. As usual, though, the institute's Niven Library was the venue for the 2023 AGM. This prominent library contains the most significant collection of works on birds in the southern hemisphere and we were delighted to receive a valuable donation of books to the Niven from Peter Steyn in 2023, including rare and unusual editions.

Conservation for Africa and the world in 2023

Contributing to the theory and practice of conservation is central to the Fitz's mission and we undertake a broad spectrum of conservation research annually. Two of the highlights from the past year were research by Professor Peter Ryan and colleagues on floating plastics

ABOVE Members of the Fitz community at the AGM in August 2023.

ABOVE, RIGHT Like its predecessors, the 2023/2024 cohort of MSc Conservation Biology students includes students representing various countries.

in the Atlantic and the risk they pose to seabirds; and work by Associate Professor Arjun Amar, Dr Francisco Cervantes, Dr Megan Murgatroyd, among others, who used 20 years of tracking data to generate a utilisation distribution map for Cape Vultures. This map is already being taken up by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment to manage the threats the development of green energy creates for this Endangered species. In 2023, two of our core academic staff, Professor Peter Ryan and Professor Claire Spottiswoode, were recognised by South Africa's National Research Foundation as international leaders in their research fields – a wonderful recognition of the quality and impact of their work on a global scale.

Training conservation biologists for Africa and abroad

The Fitz, in partnership with the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cape Town, runs a Master's programme in Conservation Biology, training some 14 conservation biologists annually. At the time of writing, the 2022/2023 cohort of Conservation Biology MSc students are about to graduate and the 2023/2024 students are embarking on their research projects. Combined, these two cohorts contain students from

11 different countries, including seven African nations. The course has graduated more than 300 students in its 30-year history. Graduates have significant positive impact on conservation efforts throughout Africa and internationally. The Fitz also celebrates the graduation of five new PhDs this year. We would like to especially mention Dr Timothy Khan Aikins, who completed his PhD with Associate Professor Robert Thomson this year. The newly minted Dr Aikins has now returned to his home country, Ghana, to teach biology and conservation to undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University for Developmental Studies in Tamale.

Looking ahead to 2024

Next year, the Fitz team will continue its efforts to improve our understanding of, and ability to conserve, our birds and biodiversity, and to train biologists and conservationists for the future. Watch this space!

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