



## NEWS FROM THE PERCY FITZPATRICK INSTITUTE

*The birth and rise of the Fitztitute (PART 2)*

The Fitztitute's first director assumed office in September 1960. Remarkably, there have been only four directors during the 50 years of the Fitztitute's history: Jack Winterbottom (1960–1971), Roy Siegfried (1972–1995), Morné du Plessis (1997–2007) and Phil Hockey (2008–present).

**I**n 1972, as part of a strengthening of the relationship between the Fitztitute and the University of Cape Town, a teaching component (mostly postgraduate) was added to the Fitztitute's terms of reference. Because of the mutually reinforcing relationship between postgraduate teaching and research, once the Fitztitute had built up a 'critical mass' of graduate students, its research prospered. But the winds of political change were gathering. By the mid-1980s, politically imposed intellectual sanctions were firmly in place and their associated impacts were felt across almost the full spectrum of science in South Africa. Despite this, in 1989 ornithology was identified as the South African scientific discipline that had the greatest international impact.

However, political change was inevitable, and the Fitztitute positioned itself accordingly. Anticipating a democratic government and the associated removal of intellectual sanctions, in 1992 the Fitztitute launched an MSc course in Conservation Biology. The course aimed to be as African as possible in both its content and students. Today, 85 per cent of its graduates have conservation-related jobs. This reflects the high success of the programme in identifying conservation leaders, helping them to develop and equipping them to compete successfully in the conservation sector. The Fitztitute's rise in the field of conservation biology was boosted in 2006 with the appointment of the Pola Pasvolsky Chair in Conservation Biology, made possible by a generous private endowment to the Institute. In 2008, an international analysis concluded that conservation science at UCT was the strongest in the southern hemisphere and that UCT ranked equal with the fourth-rated of 314 universities in North America.

In 1997, the Fitztitute contracted with the trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund to rewrite *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa*. This was the book, first published in 1940, that was to revolutionise interest in birds in South Africa. *Roberts VII* took more than seven years and resulted in one of the most comprehensive handbooks available for any part of the world, weighing in at more than five kilograms



*The Fitztitute's first director, Dr Jack Winterbottom, guided the work of the Institute from its founding in 1960 until 1971.*

and being almost 1 300 pages in extent. Hundreds of people were involved in various phases of the project, and its scope and reach helped cement the name of the Fitztitute as being synonymous with avian research and African bird conservation. The response of the public to the new *Roberts* was overwhelming, with the first print-run of 10 000 books selling out within three months of publication.

Today, the Fitztitute is the only establishment of its kind in the southern hemisphere. It is arguably also the most active of its kind in the world, in terms of its programmes of both research and education. It has produced more than 250 MSc and PhD students from 40 countries, 23 of them in Africa. The Fitztitute currently has five permanent academic staff members and some 60 postgraduate students and post-doctoral fellows. In addition to undertaking scientific research, it has always been conscious of its responsibility to share its work with the public. More than a thousand communiqués have been issued by the Fitztitute in the form of books, magazine and newspaper articles, leaflets and brochures, and radio and television programmes.

In recognition of its past achievements and future potential, in 2004 the Fitztitute was awarded the prestigious status of being one of only six National Centres of Excellence in Science and Technology, an award made by the South African Department of Science and Technology and the National Research Foundation.