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UCT academic honoured by Oppenheimer Memorial Trust

Prof Les Underhill to use R1m award to recruit 'Citizen Scientists' to help monitor depleting wildlife populations in Africa

The University of Cape Town congratulates Professor Les Underhill, the Director of the Department of Zoology and the Animal Demographics Unit (ADU) at UCT, who received the Harry Oppenheimer Fellowship Award from the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust on Friday, 1 June 2012. The award carries a monetary value of up to R1 million, "granted to candidates of the highest calibre to enable them to undertake a programme of cutting edge, internationally significant work", according to the trust.

Professor Underhill is the 12th recipient of the award since its inception and the fourth from UCT, according to the trust. When he was awarded his PhD in mathematical statistics in 1973, he was capped by Harry Oppenheimer, who was Chancellor of UCT at the time.

Professor Underhill will use the award to develop the ADU's Citizen Scientist programme, which recruits lay people across Africa to photograph and record the location of various animal populations to develop a reliable, up-to-date map of animal distribution and the shift in the ranges of different species. Photos can be [uploaded](#) to help build "virtual museums" that document the sightings. GPS readings and GoogleMap can be used to help locate the animal sightings.

Professor Danie Visser, UCT's Deputy Vice-Chancellor for research, said in an announcement to the UCT community: "This prestigious award recognises not only the high calibre of research Professor Underhill brings to the study of biodiversity, but also the importance of developing a solid statistical record for measuring the changes in animal numbers and their locations – what he refers to as 'statistical ecology'."

Professor Visser said: "UCT is committed to conducting research that contributes in a practical way to solving problems that affect South Africa and the continent. Professor Underhill's work will help measure the effects of global warming on wildlife and the success or failure of efforts to conserve the species that are under threat – helping to preserve biodiversity, which is essential for the planet's life system."

For example, input from the ADU's Citizen Scientists is helping to create annual maps of bird distribution, so that conservationists can be alerted to problems as they arise. They can monitor the range expansion of the Common Myna and the range contraction of the Secretary Bird, among others. The ADU has also embarked on Africa's grandest mammal-research mission yet: MammalMAP,

which will compile the first atlas of all mammal species living on the continent today to improve the conservation of all African mammals in a completely unbiased way.

Under the terms of the award, Professor Underhill will develop a toolkit for biodiversity monitoring in South Africa. This project includes a series of projects to monitor animal populations – some with the help of Citizen Scientists, others with the help of zoology students. The projects include:

- The Southern Africa Bird Atlas project, in which about 1300 birders are contributing information about their sightings of bird species in South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho and Swaziland;
- Bird ringing;
- PHOWN (Photos of Weaver Nests) project across Africa;
- MammalMAP;
- African Penguins;
- Verreaux's Eagles; and
- Great White Sharks

Professor Underhill and the leaders of the various projects are available for interviews or to answer questions via email. Visits to the field can also be arranged for journalists and TV crews.

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