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UCT climate scientist wins prestigious international award

Professor Mark New, Director of the African Climate and Development Initiative (ACDI) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), has been named as the 2018 recipient of the Piers Sellers Prize for world-leading contributions to solution-focused climate research.

The award is one of the two bestowed annually in the former astronaut and climate scientist's name by the Priestley International Centre for Climate. This year, the award reflects a lifelong contribution, based on interdisciplinary research outputs and evidence of resulting impacts on climate solutions.

Professor New will be presented with the Piers Sellers Prize at a special event at the University of Leeds on Monday 19 March, at which he will deliver a lecture entitled: ["Anatomy of a water crisis: climate, demographics, communication, behaviour and politics in Cape Town"](#).

The topical lecture – which falls in the same week as [World Water Day](#) (Thursday 22 March) – will analyse the factors that have led to Cape Town's drought as winter rains have repeatedly failed, causing dam levels to drop to low levels.

New, who is the Pro Vice Chancellor for Climate Change at the UCT and AXA Research Fund Chair in African Climate Risk, is a global leader in the interdisciplinary integration of climate and development research. He is at the forefront of cutting-edge research on the twin issues of low carbon and climate resilient development from a strongly African perspective. The ACDI that he directs reflects the largest concentration of expertise in climate and development in Africa.

A highly cited author – he has published widely and in leading journals. He is a leader in the development of global and regional climate datasets that have been used to underpin climate impacts assessments and integrated modelling, the detections of climate extremes and issues around uncertainty and accuracy of climate data.

New was nominated for the prize by Prof Lea Berrang Ford, Priestley Chair in Climate and Health, who cited two solutions oriented research projects as examples of his outputs. One, GreenSkills, works to facilitate a more proactive approach to green planning in South Africa using a systems-based perspective for capacity building. It has also developed training materials and programmes, including a toolkit for organisational development and the greening of jobs along the value chain of an organisation or sector.

The other project, SmartAgri, provides a road map for actionable and prioritised initiatives to get the agricultural sector moving towards greater climate resilience, as well as the production of Climate Change Response Implementation Plan.

Ford explains: "Mark initially trained in the physical sciences and his early contributions and expertise focused on climate modelling. His more recent publications reflect a transition to stronger interdisciplinary and policy-focused research, with research emphasis shifting to include adaptation, mitigation and development implications of climate scenarios and uncertainty."

More recently, New's research on impacts and adaptation has addressed broader adaptation policy issues around high-end climate change and dangerous climate impacts, and approaches to adaptation decision making under uncertainty. As a result, his expertise has garnered requests for policy-facing consultancy and advisory roles from the World Bank, the Asian and African Development Banks, UK Department for International Development, US Agency for International Development, and the World Wildlife Foundation.

"I am delighted Mark has been selected for the prize out of a very strong field of contenders for the lifelong contribution award. He takes an interdisciplinary approach, working with other stakeholders, and the title of his talk on the Cape Town water crisis reflects the complex and intertwining nature of the issues involved in his area of climate research," added Ford.

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