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UCT professor elected as Fellow of the Royal Society

William Bond, Emeritus Professor at the University of Cape Town's Department of Biological Sciences, has been elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society, the world's oldest scientific academy. Bond is the seventh South African to be accorded the honour and will join the ranks of other icons of science, including Charles Darwin, Isaac Newton and Stephen Hawking, when he is inducted as a Fellow later this year.

"You know it looked like such an innocent little email when I first saw it," says Bond, of his reaction to hearing the good news. "When I opened it, I was paralysed with shock for quite a while. It is only now that it is starting to sink in."

Bond is recognised as a global authority on open ecosystems and his research into the forces that shape global vegetation, including wildfire, CO2 levels and herbivores, is credited with transforming our understanding of how these systems emerged. In 2013 he was admitted as a foreign associate of the United States' National Academy of Sciences and in 2020 was once again included in the Highly Cited Researcher list, which recognises the contribution of scientists who demonstrate significant and broad influence through the publication of multiple papers frequently cited by their peers over the course of a decade.

When he first started out in the field of ecology however, he had little idea that his research would one day become global.

"I was inspired to become an ecologist by my older sister who read widely as a journalist and always portrayed ecology as an important field," Bond remembers, "but I only appreciated its scope and scientific fascination decades later."

The first time Bond travelled to give a speech at the Royal Society he was in awe of the beautiful building and august history of the society, including the book which holds the signatures of all Fellows, including the likes of Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin.

"Charles Darwin has always been a hero of mine because he is such a wonderful guide to travelling the world as a biologist and such an astute observer of human society," Bond says.

Bond says at this moment in time when misinformation is a real danger and the biomes that he has spent his career studying are under serious threat, it is a great honour to be recognised by an institution such as the Royal Society which promotes the role of science.

"Science has given us a way to test new human ideas and that is something to be treasured. Reason has been such a powerful tool for us humans, but logic alone is not the answer. In

fact, science requires the imagination to make connections that lead to new discoveries and this creativity comes from all sorts of sources, including art, music, myth and poetry. I think that's where South Africa and Africa has much to offer: our perspective is unique and valuable; it leads to new ways of seeing," Bond says.

Speaking at the announcement of the 2021 cohort of 52 fellows chosen from over 700 applicants, Sir Adrian Smith, President of the Royal Society, says the global COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of scientific thinking and collaboration across borders.

"Each Fellow and Foreign Member brings their area of scientific expertise to the Royal Society and when combined, this expertise supports the use of science for the benefit of humanity."



Emeritus Professor William Bond has been elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society.

Photo: UCT

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