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BASIC RESEARCH IN TRUE PERSPECTIVE

Sir George Porter, president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, has remarked that the days of ivory-tower snobbishness about 'pure' research are long since past. In a recent presidential address to the association he elaborated as follows:

'Our government is quite right to emphasise the need for science to contribute to the prosperity of the country, to link its activities more closely to those of innovation and productivity of our industries. More applied research, more engineers, more scientific entrepreneurs are urgently needed to provide the new industrial revolution which will put our country back into the first league.

But where some of our political leaders must be challenged is when they seem to imply that this is an alternative to basic science rather than complementary to it and when they advocate that scientists doing basic research should mend their ways and concentrate their minds on short-term applications which will help us to 'get rich quick'. To feed applied science by starving basic science is like economising on the foundations of a building so that it may be built higher. It is only a matter of time before the whole edifice crumbles. And those foundations that are being skimped include scientific education as well.'

ex SACNS Bull. 3., Nov. 1987.

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NEWS FROM THE BOTANY DEPARTMENT - UNIVERSITY OF TRANSKEI

The Botany Department at the University of Transkei has experienced many changes since it hosted the SAAB congress in 1986. These include changes in staff, undergraduate courses, research emphasis and the imminent move to a new, more convenient location in an extension of the present building.

The Department has a staff complement of 8, although several of these posts are currently vacant. Most recently Professor J.E. Granger moved to the University of Durban-Westville, and Ms F. Meredith will depart at the end of this year. However, the appointment of three staff members this year has injected new approaches and ideas into the existing teaching and research programmes.

Dr C.H. Dickinson joined the Department in March on a twenty month sabbatical from the University of Newcastle on Tyne, U.K. He has numerous publications to his credit in the field of decomposition, plant pathology and fungal taxonomy. He has three projects under way concerned with biesbuck dung decay, mangrove root growth and decay, and leaf epiphytes in subtropical forests.

Dr T.V. Jacobs has joined the Department from the University of Zimbabwe as a taxonomist and Curator of our ever-expanding herbarium. He has previously worked in Kenya. He has already initiated research to investigate the cytotaxonomy of the genus Hypoxis.

Mr D. White also joined us from Zimbabwe as a junior lecturer. His research is orientated towards the attainment of a Masters degree and will focus on algae-grazer dynamics. It will involve active co-operation with the rocky shore group in the Department of Zoology.

The most significant impact on the development of the Department will be the move into the new extension within the next six months. This will house the whole department on one level, a welcome improvement on the existing situation. The new Department will house three growth rooms which have been the only major facility lacking in the present building. Generous grants to equip the new Department have ensured that the Department continues to be well endowed with equipment for all spheres of research and teaching.

The new research programmes are timely in that most existing research programmes are reaching their conclusion. Mr S. Cawe has completed the classification of the inland forests of Transkei along with determination of their commercial potential (to be published in the next edition of S. Afr. J. Bot.). He has now switched his attention to the coastal forests. Ms A. Bosa has been investigating the role of abscisic acid in root elongation of stressed Zea mays plants. The write-up will be complete by the end of 1988. Mr C. Shackleton is also due to complete the synthesis of the research at Mkambati Game Reserve within the next few months. Major aspects included the classification of coastal grasslands along with determination of their primary productivity and how that was influenced by herbivory and fire. Ms S. Shackleton's research into the autecology of Cymbopogon validus should be complete early in 1989. A significant aspect was a socio-economic assessment of the importance of this grass as thatching material to local peoples.

Ongoing projects include those on the Transkei Iron Age and the flora of Transkei. Mr F. Prins is reconstructing the vegetation patterns in Transkei over the last 2000 years. It is the second phase of the work published by Mr J. Feeley and co-authors. Mr Strever has made good progress in collecting herbarium specimens from the Transkei Drakensberg and this work will be continued by a new assistant herbarium curator under the guidance of Dr Jacobs.

Student numbers have continued to increase. An important development has been the introduction of the PLATO system for computer-based education. Most staff have completed courses on the use of the system and it made a successful contribution to the teaching of the second and third year groups.

C.M. Shackleton, C.H. Dickinson.

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