

NEWS RELEASE

UP conservation ecologist makes international science society's list of top 50 changemakers



Dr Bernard Coetzee conducting fieldwork.

PRETORIA - Conservation ecologist [Dr Bernard Coetzee](#), a senior lecturer in the University of Pretoria's (UP) [Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences](#), was recently recognised as part of [The Explorers Club 50's Class of 2025](#), "Fifty people changing the world, that the world needs to know about".

Founded in 1904, the club is an international multidisciplinary professional society that is dedicated to the advancement of field research, scientific exploration and resource conservation. Every year, it distinguishes 50 people who are doing impactful work to promote science and exploration. Members of this club have been renowned pioneers, such as the first explorers to reach the summit of Mount Everest, the North and South Poles,

and even the surface of the moon.

For Dr Coetzee, who helps run the [Conservation Ecology Research Unit](#) at UP, being recognised as a member of The Explorers Club 50's Class of 2025 is a chance to connect with like-minded individuals from a broad range of backgrounds, and to raise his profile and that of his team.

"I see it as a connection platform in an increasingly disconnected world," he says.

Dr Coetzee is known for his conservation work on some of the smallest to some of the biggest creatures. His earlier research focused on how artificial light sources at night can affect the biology of mosquitos; currently, he is focusing on human-elephant co-existence.

"I had an unusual path into academia," Dr Coetzee says. "While I have strengths in the regular requirements for such a position, such as postgraduate degrees and scientific papers and acquiring funding for my research group, much of my career was deeply rooted outside of academia, working with both small and very large conservation NGOs. This has deeply affected my work and work ethic, as I'm always seeking impact, policy outcomes and real change on the ground, not only rigorous science."

With the help of the Jennifer Ward Oppenheimer Research Grant and the Conservation Ecology Research Unit, he was able to join UP's Department of Zoology and Entomology as part of a research-heavy portfolio, and eventually become a senior lecturer there.

Dr Coetzee has a broad interest in conservation, not necessarily focusing on just one species of animal, and has conducted fieldwork all around the world, from Africa to Antarctica.

"My interests have always been broad and not necessarily tied to specific organisms," he says. "In general, I focus on the drivers of biodiversity loss, and how we are changing the night-time environment, especially through light pollution."

He explains that the fates of humanity and biodiversity are inextricably linked, and that this reasoning alone should be sufficient to attract the attention of everyone, not just conservationists and explorers. However, this intertwined fate can often complicate the co-existence of animals and humans. Human-elephant conflict is by no means a new phenomenon and has resulted in a never-ending debate about human-animal boundaries, and the safety of both humans and elephants.

"Elephants are a particularly enigmatic and iconic species for many people and cultures across the world," Dr Coetzee says. "Much of our work is to understand their functional roles in systems, rather than play an archaic game of 'how many are too many'. From a conservation perspective, elephants in Southern Africa are doing well, but this is not the case elsewhere in the world, and all three species are in danger of extinction."

Ultimately, he views The Explorers Club 50 recognition as a way to connect with people who are all trying to better understand the planet and humanity's role in it.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP's Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za