

SA climate change researcher receives British Ecological Society award

South Africa's Professor Wendy Foden, a globally recognised researcher in climate change vulnerability assessments of threatened species, has been awarded the British Ecological Society's [Marsh award for climate change research](#).



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According to the British Ecological Society (BES), Foden is recognised for the global reach of her work with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Red List of Threatened Species, as well as for her interest in translating science for practical conservation use, and in fostering conservation leadership. The award, provided by the Marsh Christian Trust and administered by the British Ecological Society, will be handed over in 2021.

Foden is currently based at South African National Parks' Cape Research Centre, where she leads a team carrying out applied research in and around the region's national parks. She is also associated with the Universities of Stellenbosch and Cape Town as associate professor, and has chaired the Climate Change Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Species Survival Commission since 2014.

Opportunities for trans-disciplinary collaboration

Foden says a non-linear career path, which has left her with one foot in research and the other in applied conservation, has enabled her to spot gaps and opportunities for trans-disciplinary collaboration: "Most of my research has been highly collaborative, so the award recognises the work of a community of very dedicated researchers. I'm simply fortunate to be in a position to gather key people together to create really useful products while we have a good laugh. I'm glad that such 'soft skills' are increasingly recognised in science."

From 2007 to 2013, Foden led IUCN's development of a method for assessing species' vulnerability to climate change, drawing on a wide range of experts' field knowledge and research findings to produce an assessment that could be used alongside the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species: "We applied the method to the world's birds, amphibians, corals and the study became the first to tackle entire species groups across the world. The approach has been widely adopted and is now used by researchers and conservationists around the world," she explains.

From 2014 to 2016 she continued this work to establish global best-practice guidelines for assessing species' vulnerability to climate change, again bringing together a diverse group of researchers and practitioners from around the globe: "Since our field is new, it meant arduously wading through a great many dark and tangled uncertainties. Ultimately, we managed to draw together practical guidance for conservation practitioners and we're currently working with IUCN to include these as part of IUCN Red List training."

"The guidelines also highlight a number of important research needs and gaps. I think that the messiest and most uncertain areas of science are the most exciting and provide the greatest opportunity to do meaningful and innovative work. I may have a lot more grey hair and stronger reading glasses than when I began this work, but I've never been bored and it's very satisfying to see it being used," she adds.

For this work, she recently received the IUCN's George Rabb award for her "innovative, dynamic and thoughtful leadership of SSC's work on climate change".

Inspiring other African women scientists

Professor Jane Memmott, president of the British Ecological Society, said every year the prizes recognise and celebrate the exceptional contributions of individuals to advancing ecology and communicating its importance for society: “I am delighted to offer my congratulations to the winners of this year’s BES awards for their exceptional contributions to ecology.”

Foden said she was surprised by the award, but extremely proud to represent Africa’s woman scientists: “I hope that the award inspires other women scientists, particularly from developing countries, to step up to conservation and climate change challenges,” she concludes.

View the full list of the 2020 British Ecological Society award winners [here](#).

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