

AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Life Fellowship, University of Cape Town (UCT) (1991)
- British Petroleum Scholarship, Visiting Professor in the Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, and Visiting Research Fellowship at Merton College, Oxford (1980 – 1981)
- British Council Scholarship at Silwood Park, Imperial College, London (1974)

DEFINING MOMENT

"In those far-off days, if you were freshly graduated with such an exalted degree as an MSc, you did not apply for jobs, you juggled your various job offers!" Thus, on Thursday 28 of March 1963 he signed a contract, typed on one page of foolscap paper, accepting a temporary lectureship in Entomology at Rhodes University (RU). The post came with the princely salary of R195.00 per month (with no perks at all); he had turned down far more lucrative offers, ostensibly with better career prospects, from industry. "There was no apparent rationale underpinning my choice, except that a stint in academia seemed agreeable. But that almost by-the-way decision was the defining moment in a fulfilling career far beyond any reasonable or pragmatic expectations."

WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

Despite 50 years of commitment to research in his field, Moran views himself primarily as an effective administrator, mentor, reviewer and editor, and 'as a person who gets things done through collaboration, rather than as a top-notch scientist'. "I attribute most of what I have achieved not to any special or innovative talents that I might be perceived to have but to persistence and to sustained and mutually beneficial partnerships with top scientists in South Africa and abroad."

THE AMAZING WORLD OF INSECTS AND PLANTS

Vincent "Cliff" Moran is enthusiastic and entertaining in discussing entomology, so it's not difficult to imagine his curiosity, as a 16-year-old, when he observed an older girl swinging her butterfly net back-and-forth in the grass, catching insects for a university project. A quick peek through her field microscope at the extraordinary variety and beauty of form and colour of the many hundreds

of insects that she had captured had him instantly intrigued and entranced.

That experience certainly played a role in Moran's choice of biological subjects when he first entered RU in 1956. As an undergraduate student, however, he admits to spending more time idling with his friends or playing competitive squash than diligently attending to his studies. In the end he passed his exams "adequately, but without particular distinction". That is now all a lifetime ago for this ever-modest man, who has been Dean of Science at two of South Africa's most respected universities, and who has travelled the world in pursuit of his passion. He lectured at RU from 1963 to 1978, became Professor of Entomology there in 1979, and then, from 1983 to 1985, Dean of the Science Faculty. In 1986, Moran was appointed permanent full-time Dean of Science at UCT, a post he held until 1999.

Since the sixties, he has co-authored a book on insect pests and published more than a hundred research articles in respected international journals on insect-plant relationships or on biological control of alien invasive plants. He describes himself as "reasonably well-cited" and isn't comfortable with any suggestion he is a "top-notch scientist". Moran says he is rather "meticulous, almost to the point of being obsessive: I like things to be done properly, and I think that attribute really helped me, both as a researcher and as an administrator."

An NRF A-rated scientist for eight years, he is adamant that without the support of "some of the best people in the world, here in South Africa and abroad," his life achievements in his field would have been far more "modestly influential and impactful than they have been". One who he says deserves special mention is Professor Dennis Ewer, from Cambridge University in the United Kingdom. This brilliant teacher and researcher inspired Moran when he came to South Africa and eventually to RU as Head of the Department of Zoology and Entomology. Ewer "lived for science" and would import relevant journals by airmail from Britain at his own expense.

"He taught me what research and publishing was all about and insisted that his students should look outwards and aspire to compete with the top scholars at the big overseas universities," he recalls. Moran followed suit at a time,



during the 1960s and 1970s, when South African science had become isolated, complacent and inward-looking. He took actions at RU and then at UCT to ensure that "our work and that of our postgraduate students was exposed to critical scrutiny by some of the top names in our field, globally." This opened the way to invitations to visit institutions abroad and to attend conferences, securing access for the universities' best postgraduate students, and drawing overseas visitors to South Africa. These initiatives dovetailed with the start, in 1984, of the Foundation for Research Development, now the National Research Foundation (NRF) rating system.

Moran was involved for 25 years with the work of many of the NRF committees. He is justly proud of this involvement, and of his role as a facilitator of research during his years as UCT's Dean of Science: "The UCT Science Faculty has more NRF-rated scientists than any other university in the country, and I remain convinced that it was encouraging increased exposure to and critical comment from those in the big wide world out there that helped in cementing UCT's place as Africa's top-ranked university," he says.

SUPPRESSING INVASIVE ALIENS

Of his work as a researcher that had the most impact, Moran cites his influence in the field of biological control of invasive alien plants in South Africa, using plant-feeding insects to suppress problem plants. "Suppressing alien invasive plants contributes to agricultural endeavours and to conservation efforts. My

special interest in the biocontrol of invasive alien trees has helped to reduce the frequency and intensity of damaging wildfires and, most particularly, resulted in huge socio-economic benefits through improving run-off of water from catchments into rivers to help preserve the country's meagre water supplies," he says, explaining that about 7% of the country's water is used up by alien invasive trees.

Moran was also fundamentally influential in how research on the biocontrol of weeds gained momentum in South Africa from the mid-1970s, from low levels of funding, with relatively few research and support staff and students, to what it is today, with 150 or more people involved. "South African researchers are now acknowledged as the international leaders in research and implementation of weed biocontrol."

He is grateful for his privileged life and career, with his research taking him to many places on five continents and allowing him to collaborate with congenial and inspiring colleagues from all over the world. "In particular, I owe much of what I am perceived to have achieved in my career to close interactions with Professor John Hoffmann of UCT, Dr Helmuth Zimmermann and the late Dr David Annecke, both formerly of the Plant Protection Institute in Pretoria, and since the late 1960s, to my friendships and collaborations with the late Professor Sir Richard Southwood of Silwood Park and Oxford, and with Professor Walter Tschinkel of Florida State. All of these people variously made much of what happened in my professional life actually happen," Moran says.

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A. Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Publications

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Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), (2019). Legends of South African Science II.

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