

CSIR researcher elected to prestigious US science organisation

A CSIR system ecologist has been elected as a foreign associate to the US National Academy of Sciences (NAS), an honour bestowed upon the world's best scientists as chosen by their peers.

Dr Bob Scholes is systems ecologist who is well known for his contributions in the fields of global change, ecology and earth observation. With this achievement he joins the ranks of a small number of elite South African scientists, among them the late Prof Phillip Tobias, a paleoanthropologist from the University of the Witwatersrand, best known for his work at South African hominid fossil sites.

According to Thompson ISI, who maintain databases on scientific publications worldwide, Scholes is among the top 1% of environmental scientists worldwide based on citation frequency, publishing widely in his chosen fields. He has a particular interest in the savannas of Africa and has over thirty years of field experience in many parts of Africa and the world.

The NAS is an independent, non-profit society, established by an Act of the United States Congress in 1863. It is regarded as one of the top Academies in the world.

Its task is to provide independent, objective advice to the US government on matters related to science, engineering and medicine. Nearly 500 of its members have won Nobel Prizes. The NAS now has 2 214 members and 444 foreign associates. Foreign associates are nonvoting members of the Academy.

Only 21 foreign associates are elected annually and there is no membership application process. Only Academy members may submit formal nominations of their peers. This is then followed by an extensive vetting process that results in a final ballot at the Academy's annual meetings in April every year.

According to the NAS, members are elected in recognition of their distinguished and continuing achievements in original research. Election to the NAS is regarded as one of the highest honours that a scientist can receive.

"I am blown away and I am humbled. It puts me in the company of

internationally respected colleagues. It is a huge honour, both for myself and for South Africa,” Scholes says of his achievement. “I hope to spread the benefits by helping the South African Academy of Science, of which I am also a member, to reach its full potential.”

Scholes has been a leader in several high-profile studies, for example the Assessment of Elephant Management and the Commission on Sustainable Agriculture and Climate Change. He has also led research campaigns such as SAFARI 2000 and the Southern African Millennium Assessment.

He is or has been a member of the steering committee of several International Council of Scientific Unions research programmes. Scholes has served as a coordinating or lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change during the 3rd, 4th and 5th assessments and was co-chair of the Conditions Working Group of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment.

He has been a member of the steering committees of several global earth observation bodies: Global Climate Observing System; Global Terrestrial Observing System (chair), Group on Earth Observation (GEO) Implementation Planning Task Team, GEO Biodiversity Observation Network (chair). He has been on the boards of the International Centre for Research in Agroforestry, the South African National Parks and South African National Space Agency.

He is a Fellow of the CSIR, Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa, Member of the South African Academy, honorary Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand, and NRF A-rated scientist.

CSIR CEO Dr Sibusiso Sibisi congratulated Scholes, saying he has done South African science proud.

The Minister of Science and Technology, Derek Hanekom, also joined the rest of the South African research community in congratulating Scholes.

“It is a great honour for South Africa because it recognises the excellent work of South African researchers and scientists and their contribution to the global body of knowledge and addressing some of the global environmental challenges. Scholes elevation and appointment to this prestigious position will serve to inspire

other South African researchers to reach the same level, and encourage young and aspiring scientists to work harder and learners to consider careers in science,” says Hanekom.