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Maarten de Wit: 1947-2020

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A TRIBUTE

Maarten de Wit: 1947–2020

Maarten de Wit was born in 1947 in the Netherlands, but spent much of his childhood in Ireland. He obtained a BSc from Trinity College, Dublin, and a PhD from the University of Cambridge, where he worked with John Dewey on tectonic problems in western Newfoundland, and where I first came to know him as a fellow graduate student.

Following his PhD, he was a postdoctoral fellow at Lamont and the University of Santiago, where he worked on the tectonics of the Antarctic Peninsula and the southern Andes. From 1976 to 1978 he worked for the UNDP on a project in Ethiopia. Maarten's experiences in 1970s Chile and Ethiopia laid the firm groundwork for a lifelong commitment to improving the lives of the world's less fortunate peoples.

Following a chance encounter with the renowned geochronologist Louis Nicolaysen in Amsterdam in 1979, Maarten moved to the Bernard Price Institute of Geophysics at the University of Witwatersrand. During his 10 years there he worked primarily on the tectonics of the Barberton Greenstone Belt while also becoming deeply involved in the global movement to resist the uncontrolled commercial exploitation of Antarctica. In 1989, he moved to the University of Cape Town where he spent 22 years. During his time at Cape Town, Maarten continued his work on the tectonics of the early Earth but also branched out spectacularly into studies of the evolution of Gondwana, preparation of a compilation map of the geology of Gondwana, the nature of Archean life, the erosional history of the African continent, the potential for shale-gas development in South Africa, the need to establish sustainable practices for the Earth system and, above all, the need to ensure that the activities of the university community were designed to deliver benefits to students from all kinds of background. These interests led him to establish the African Earth Observation Network and later the Earth Stewardship Science Research Institute (AEON-ESSRI). On retirement from the University of Cape Town in 2011, Maarten became the Chair of Earth Stewardship Science at Nelson Mandela University in Port Elizabeth, where he pursued a vigorous program of interdisciplinary studies, supervising graduate students from many different departments and faculties at the University.

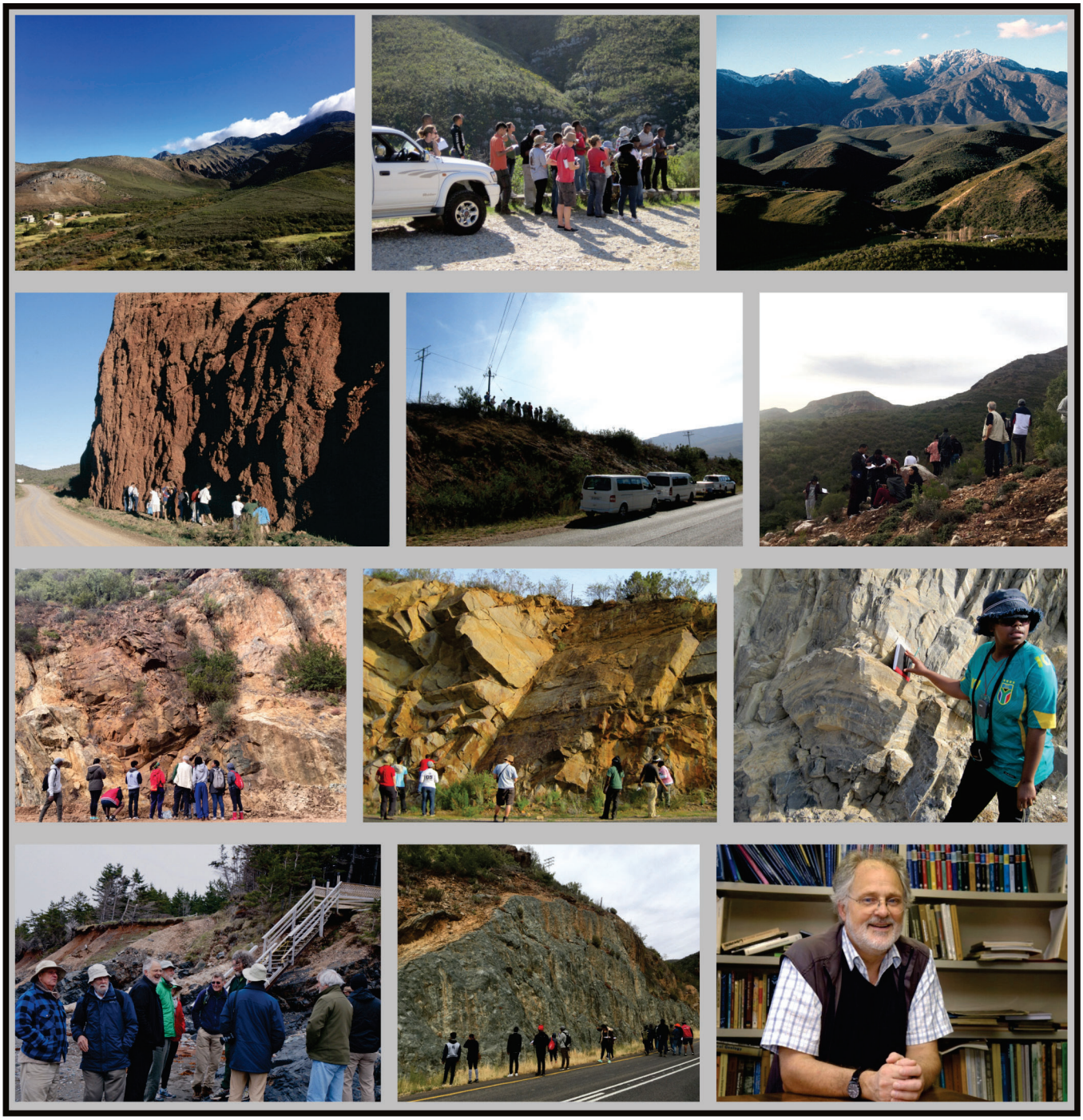
Over his career, Maarten supervised more than 75 graduate students and published more than 200 papers. He was a founding member of the South Africa Academy of Science, an Honorary Fellow of the Geological Society of America, and an Honorary Fellow of the Geological Society of London. This paper, to which he and Bastien were putting the final touches when he passed away, nicely illustrates Maarten's long-term activities in the encouragement of student participation in research, the wide scope of the scientific methods he was willing to enlist, and his abiding interest in regional tectonics. His enthusiasm, his energy, and the breadth of his interests were an inspiration to all who knew him. He leaves behind his partner Lynne, his children Thandi and Tjaart and a granddaughter Emma.

Andrew Hynes, 2020 June 10

Maarten de Wit and Andrew Hynes enjoying themselves, Nova Scotia field trip, May 2014. Photo credit: Myrna Hynes.

Maarten was full of good intentions to help young students to become scientists, especially the odd ones, and I was one of them. He was dedicated to field geology and he really enjoyed the wildness. His works were mostly maps, collages, painting and handwriting; the computers and cell phones often challenged him. Maarten constantly cultivated new ideas by interconnecting a wealth of readings, experiences, and memories to make research vibrant and attractive. He aimed to bring more together Earth and life scientists, with engineers, sociologists, artists, and the local communities. This new way of doing transdisciplinary research and 'Earth Stewardship Science' will continue forward at AEON-ESSRI.

Bastien Linol, 2020 June 23



The geological field mapping schools in the Cango with Maarten from 1996 to 2018 were fun and mind opening to many South African students. This included geomorphology, sedimentology, structural geology and of course a nice braai (barbecue) together every night at the Campsite (photo credit: Bastien Linol). Bottom left: Nova Scotia field trip, May 2014 (photo credit: Myrna Hynes).