

VICE-CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED RESEARCH MEDAL

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour of presenting to you

Julie Angela Coetzee,

Associate Professor
in the Botany Department,

for the award of the Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Research Medal.

Dr. Coetzee's research in the biological control of alien invasive weeds has reunited many rampant pest organisms in Southern Africa and further afield with their natural enemies, to restore some balance in nature. Amongst the most problematic aquatic weeds is *Eichhornia crassipes*, commonly known as water hyacinth, an aquatic plant native to the Amazon basin, but often highly problematic as an invasive species outside of its native environment. Professor Coetzee and her colleagues in the Centre for Biological Control at Rhodes University have directly, or through assistance to others, introduced, established, and evaluated more biological control organisms on this weed than any other institution on earth.

As a direct result of her research, critical water resources in South Africa and other countries have been preserved. Lake Victoria is one of the latest examples of the immense benefits provided by the foundational research and exchange of biological agents conducted by her and her colleagues and partners. She network operates as a global, non-profit enterprise for the good of humans and the natural environment, improving water quality, promoting human health, protecting natural ecosystems and preserving biodiversity, and increasing agricultural production.

In addition to the control of invasive alien plants, Professor Coetzee is exploring the post-release elements that promote ecosystem recovery and restoration, a long neglected facet of weed biological control.

All of her peer reviewers agree that Professor Coetzee has an outstanding research profile for her relatively early career stage, and is regarded as a leading researcher in the fields of invasive species ecology and biological control by both local and international colleagues. She has published 41 peer reviewed academic journal articles, 4 book chapters, supervised 4 PhD and 6 MSc students, and contributed to over 80 conference presentations. Her publications have been well cited, and she has acted as a reviewer for over 30 international academic journals. When describing this researcher and her work, reviewers choose words and phrases like “ground breaking”, “high standards”, “an exceptional scientist”, and “research initiatives and levels of research productivity (that) are impressive”.

Professor Coetzee has served as an expert advisor on several national and international panels on weed biocontrol. Amongst these, she was invited in 2016 to serve on the South African Alien Species Risk Analysis Review Panel (ASRARP), of the Department of Environmental Affairs, and also in 2016 as an expert panel member for the European Plant Protection Organisation (EPPO)/Council of Europe (CoE).

Her contribution to the protection of South Africa's natural environment, as well as to marginalised communities who rely on it, was recognised when Prof Coetzee together with her closest collaborating colleagues was awarded the prestigious NSTF-BHP Billiton GreenMatter Award in 2015. This award recognises outstanding contributions to the environment over a ten-year period, an exceptional achievement for somebody who ten years ago might have been classified as an emerging researcher. The steepness of her scholarly trajectory has seen her migrate in a short space of time from emerging researcher to established and prolific researcher, as evidenced by her recent NRF (National Research Foundation) C2 rating and her promotion to Associate Professor at Rhodes University.

As a senior research officer in the Biological Control Research Group in 2009, Professor Coetzee was instrumental in instituting the Disabled People's Programme, an empowerment project which continues today as an integral part of the Centre's mass-rearing unit, now one of the country's most productive of its kind, and an example of how research and intervention can co-exist. This unit has reared and released about one million biocontrol agents for waterweeds over the past eight years. In 2013, she took this idea further to initiate the "Disabled People's Weed Biological Control Short Course" a collaboration with the Grahamstown Area Distress Relief Association (GADRA), which provided training on aspects of biological control for members of the Grahamstown community with disabilities, with the ultimate goal of matching trained individuals with job opportunities.

One of her reviewers sums up her successful attitude and competence attributes like this: "Dr Coetzee can do both the science, and the resulting interactions with people; at all levels. Her knowledge of both animals (from invertebrates upwards) and plants is impressive and she continually challenges herself to understand the biological components of each new ecosystem she encounters."

Mr Chancellor, I request you to award the **2016 Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Research Medal** to Professor Julie Coetzee.