

The New Centre for Biological Control at Rhodes University

On the 2nd of November 2017, the new Centre for Biological Control (CBC) was launched at Rhodes University, South Africa. The Centre will allow its staff and students to build on their work and achievements of the last fifteen years by creating a hub for cultivating young scientists and increasing participation in national and international biological control initiatives.

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Since 2002, the Biological Control Research Group (BCRG) under the leadership of Prof. Martin Hill has grown substantially to the point where there are around the same number of employees as postgraduate students and post-doctoral fellows. This growth is due to generous external funding and University and infrastructural support. Over the years, the group has narrowed its focus to the classical biological control of weeds and the biological control of significant crop pests using microbial agents such as viruses and entomopathogenic

fungi. The staff and students are based across four campuses in the Eastern Cape: Rhodes University campus, the Waainek Research Facility outside Grahamstown, the Uitenhage Research Facility and Citrus Research International offices in Port Elizabeth. At Rhodes University, students are based in the Departments of Zoology and Entomology, Microbiology, Botany, Chemistry and Economics.

Since 2002, the BCRG has published over 150 peer-reviewed papers and 180 conference papers, supervised 40 masters

students and 25 PhD students and hosted nine postdoctoral fellows. Significantly, the majority of these students have gone on to employment in biological control in industry, universities, government departments and research institutes, representing an impressive capacity-building programme. The group has received several awards in recognition of the research undertaken, including the Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Research Medal (2006), the Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor's Senior Distinguished Research Medal (2013), the Rhodes University Environmental Award (2014) and notably the NSTF (National Science and Technology Forum) – GreenMatter Award (2015), which is awarded to an individual or an organization for contributions towards achieving biodiversity conservation, environmental sustainability and a Greener Economy.

The research group has been committed to engaging with the community on biological control and, through these activities, it aims to inform people and empower them in the areas of mass-rearing, research and knowledge pertaining to biological control. The community engagement activities include a School Science Internship Programme



Dr Sizwe Mabizela, Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University gave opening remarks at the CBC Launch event.

Dr Sean Moore of Citrus Research International presenting his guest talk on the Value of the Centre of Biological Control to Agriculture in South Africa.



THE CENTRE'S MISSION:

To make the Rhodes University Centre for Biological Control an internationally recognized research institute and a leading research centre.

Right: Some of the CBC students ready to show the guests around the Waainek Research Facility.



(since 2009), various Educational Outreach Events, the Sisonke Programme (enabling people with disabilities to mass-rear and release biological control agents) and an annual accredited Weed Biological Control Short Course. These activities resulted in the BCRG being awarded the Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor's Community Engagement Award (2013).

The BCRG's research is mainly aimed at national problems, however it is involved in African projects in Morocco, Ghana, Cameroon, Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique and Madagascar. Farther afield, there is collaboration with colleagues in New Zealand, Australia, Argentina, Brazil, the USA and Europe, which involves partners in many institutions. There are many opportunities to increase these collaborations; for example, Rhodes University is the seat of the International Organisation for Biological Control (IOBC) – Afrotropical Regional Section, which puts it in an excellent position to do so.

The BCRG at Rhodes University has been a very successful entity and is continually expanding the mandate of our group. This had most recently been done by opening the CBC. Becoming a Centre significantly increases the external profile, both locally and internationally, and provides a home for the staff and students, until now spread over several departments and localities. The Centre will complement other biological control organisations locally and regionally using a holistic approach to biological control, including not

only pre-release studies, but also quantifying the biodiversity and economic benefits of classical and inundative biological control. A further aim of the Centre will be to increase biological control capacity in South Africa and in Africa more broadly through short courses and nurturing undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The Centre's Vision: To (i) sustainably control environmental and agricultural pests for the protection of ecosystems and the societies that depend on them, and (ii) ensure that the maximum benefits of biological control are realised through excellence in research, implementation and community engagement.

The Centre for Biological Control will remain in the Department of Zoology and Entomology in the Science Faculty at Rhodes University. The official CBC launch was on the 2nd of November 2017, providing the opportunity to host most of the national biological control community and celebrate its achievements.



Dr Guy Preston, DDG of the Department of Environmental Affairs, and Prof Martin Hill, Director of the CBC, at Waainek Research Facility.



PHOTOS BY: KHUTHALA NANDIPHA AND KAY MONTGOMERY

