



### **Tribute: Professor Maarten de Wit**

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Today, we come together from around the world, to bid farewell to Professor Maarten de Wit, Chair of Earth Stewardship Science at the Nelson Mandela University. His sudden passing has left us bereft, as his colleagues, his fellow intellectuals, his friends, his students - past and present, his collaborators, the communities with whom he engaged, and the many, many people whose life-paths were lucky enough to intersect with his.

I reach out to his loved ones - his life partner, Lynne, his son Tjaart, his daughter Thandi Gondwana, her husband, and the newest member of the family, his grandchild. We share in your loss and the enormous and unfillable void that Maarten's departure has left.

Professor de Wit, a distinguished scholar of conscience, worked tirelessly and always in partnership with so many people, such a breadth of institutions, and touched so many lives. I am known to urge colleagues and friends to be perpetually restless in our shared search for a better and more just world. And this was the very essence of Maarten - always seeking; always searching and researching; always questioning; always imagining new ways to explore and discover - always restless in his quest to

go deeper and find out more. And ALWAYS basing this on thorough and deep research.

Through his scientific work, he taught us both the insignificance and fleetingness of a human being in the bigger scheme of things on the one hand, and the importance of stewardship of the earth as an inheritance for generations that will come after us, on the other. Our University and its scholarly project, as well as our reputation, was immediately expanded through our association with Maarten's significant body of work. His scholarship speaks cogently to the everlasting and sustained presence of his honest, engaged, challenging and restless scholarship among us, so that we keep on learning and discovering, knowing fully well that he lived as he wished; and that we should as well.

Maarten was generous - almost to a fault, in encouraging his students and colleagues. Yet he was rigorous and insisted on each student giving the very best that they could offer, digging deep into themselves in this quest. He was an engaging and challenging colleague, speaking his truth, and always welcoming debate and the contestation of ideas. His participation and collaboration within the university knew no boundaries, and I know that this was true of his international partnerships too. To his core, he believed in transdisciplinarity. He sought this out, he built it, he practiced it, and he invited and encouraged others on this journey. His basis for transdisciplinarity was the depth of his own discipline and expertise, based on geology and earth stewardship science. He deeply respected the base disciplines of others as the essence of new discoveries through trans-disciplinary approaches.

Maarten impacted in ways that he himself was too humble to acknowledge, to the aims of Nelson Mandela University to be a values-driven, engaged and people-centred public higher education institution that is in service to society. He was energetic in his intellectual contributions to the University's intention be a dynamic African university. He generated cutting-edge knowledge for an inter-connected global future. He stood in class and taught students about the earth, and its deep core secrets and powers. He inspired students and colleagues alike to seek the truth in as yet unimaginable

ways through research, research and still more research. He published widely, travelled extensively to build networks of collaboration and set up opportunities for students to learn from the best minds in the world, always in solidarity with the African continent. He experimented with new forms and modes of thought, and new practices of producing, framing and distributing knowledge and its relationship to society. He was indefatigable and a constant source of agitation and inspiration. He taught us all so much.

To Maarten's family, I don't, neither do I pretend to, understand the depth of your sudden loss, but trust that this will get better with time, as you celebrate his commanding legacy, that showed all of us that moving between margin and centre is possible, is doable.

As we come together today in our sadness, I trust that we will take strength from each other. I know that Maarten's stories and memories live in the minds of each of us through our rich shared experiences with our colleague and friend.

I salute the indomitable spirit of Maarten de Wit, who by the sheer force of his intellect, his science, and his love of humanity, changed the world.