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Tribute to Prof. Pieter Daniel Theron

Collectif: Zoology North-West University School of Environmental Sciences^a

Obituary

Professor Pieter Daniel Theron was born in Britstown, Northern Cape, South Africa in 1945. He matriculated at the age of 16 where after he boarded a train to undertake his studies at the then Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE). Upon completion of his BSc in 1965, he was convinced by the Head of Department, Prof. P.A.J. Ryke to rather pursue postgraduate studies than go into teaching as originally intended. He completed his BSc Honours and MSc in 1968. He received his Doctor Scientiae (DSc) under the supervision of Prof. Ryke based on a taxonomic-ecological study of selected edaphic Endeostimata (Trombidiformes: Acari) in 1972. He was employed in the Department of Zoology at PU for CHE since 1966 until his retirement in 2011. During this period, he was Head of Department of both Zoology and the UNISA Life Sciences that was presented by North-West University (and the former PU-CHE). Even after his retirement he remained active in both teaching and research at the NWU as a Post-65 and extraordinary Professor appointment until 2018.

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As researcher, Pieter Theron, specialized in the mite suborder Endeostigmata but towards the end of his career was also involved in projects on other mite families, a total 42 papers, resulting from his collaborations with 35 co-workers. The bulk of his 71 publications were published after 2003. He was instrumental in the description of 112 new species, 23 new genera, and two new families and one new subfamily and tribus. The depictions in his publications were masterly composed. This served as a catalyst for the interest of other researchers in the Endeostigmata. He had a long research relationship with Prof. Yves Coineau of the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Arthropodes, Paris, France. Their area of interest was the rock-dwelling Adamystidae and Saxidromidae from which five papers resulted and additionally a number of specimens were still in the process of being described. Just before his retirement and thereafter he collaborated with Prof. Nestor Fernandez of the National Council of Scientific and Technological Research, La Rioja University, La Rioja, Argentina on several oribatid families which resulted in 32 papers. At the end of his career, he assisted Russian Acarologists during their visit to South Africa in 2016 and 2018 in their search for mites associated with anthills. From this short collaboration, eight articles resulted and a new species named after Pieter Theron, namely *Tanytydeus theroni* (Paratydeidae). During his career, seven additional mite species was named after him: *Anaplonobia theroni* and *Neopetrobia theroni* (Tetranychidae), *Stigmaeus pieteri* (Stigmaeidae), *Typhlodromus (Anthoseius) theroni* (Phytoseiidae), *Adamystis theroni* (Adamystidae), *Grandjeanicus theroni* (Grandjeanicidae) and *Uropoda theroni* (Uropodidae). Pieter Theron was also the first chair-person of the African Acarology Association established in 1998 in Pretoria till 2004.

As teacher and mentor, Pieter Theron will be remembered fondly by all his students and specifically those first-year students (which include numerous current and retired academics) whom he taught over his more than 50 years of teaching at the North-West University (the then Potchefstroom University for CHE). During this time, he was also one of the developers and first presenters of the UNISA Zoology practicals presented in Potchefstroom since the mid-1960s. For decades, he was also involved in the week-long Ecology field excursion of the third-year NWU and UNISA Zoology students. Most of his colleagues will attest to the fact that he could always be approached for valuable advice (and acting as a soundboard) on lecturing or logistical issues with regards to teaching undergraduate modules. Numerous graduated students will attest to the fact that they've known Prof. Theron from their years as school learners. He was always keen and approachable to explain to them and their parents what Zoology as university subject entailed and possible career possibilities to be pursued. After his retirement in 2011 he stayed on as an extraordinary Professor and was still actively involved in teaching undergraduate modules in "Philosophy of Science" and as a guest lecturer for Invertebrate Zoology. He was also the main contributor to a publication on the history of the Zoology department, documenting the centenary celebrations of the NWU Faculty of Natural Sciences in 2017.

Even though acarology and taxonomy are not a very popular field of research interest, Pieter was always able to attract postgraduate students due to the personal interest he took in them. In some cases, he would even successfully bet on the academic underdog whom ultimately would make a success of their studies. In this way he made a contribution in their professional and personal development. He lived his research out in teaching by always elucidating with examples from his field work; and even at home, allowing some of his Acari pets (ticks) to feed on his pet dogs to the dismay of his wife. Pieter Theron was a precise scientist with a formidable memory. A memory where he treasured memories of a life time, a lifetime of colleagues who will now remember him with fondness.

Colleagues, North-West University, School of Environmental Sciences and Development (Zoology)

Potchefstroom
South Africa

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