



# Maarten de Wit 1947–2020: An appreciation

**AUTHOR:**  
Peter Vale<sup>1,2</sup>

Maarten de Wit and I met at a raucous party in a ramshackle mansion on West Street in Sandton (Johannesburg, South Africa) 42 years ago.

**AFFILIATIONS:**  
<sup>1</sup>Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa  
<sup>2</sup>Africa Earth Observatory Network, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

At the time, his arrival in South Africa seemed counter-intuitive: what could a Dutch-born, Irish-raised, Cambridge-educated geologist teach South Africans: didn't the country produce the world's best in this field? Beyond this particular apartheid conceit, another tugged in the opposite direction: was he breaking the academic boycott?

**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**  
Peter Vale

It did not take too long for all to realise that he was no ordinary newcomer, or geologist, or, indeed, academic. The central mission of his life's project then – as it was on 15 April 2020, the day he died – was to do something for Africa. In delivering on this mission he produced scientific literature which, surely, is unsurpassed amongst his cohort, not only in its volume but in its quality. He founded and sustained a pioneering institution and inspired academic-activists in the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities.

**EMAIL:**  
petercvale@gmail.com

The sliver of his work with which I was first acquainted displayed his uncanny ability to connect the scientific with the social and political. To explain: when we met, I was writing up a doctoral thesis on Western security interests in South Africa, especially the dependence on the country's strategic minerals. De Wit immediately saw the link between this work and the nascent debate over mining the Antarctic; the result was his book, *Minerals and Mining in Antarctica: Science and Technology, Economics and Politics* published in 1985.<sup>1</sup>

**HOW TO CITE:**  
Vale P. Maarten de Wit 1947–2020: An appreciation. *S Afr J Sci.* 2020;116(5/6), Art. #8211, 1 page. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2020/8211>

His argument was that mining in the Antarctic might provide an alternative to South Africa's monopoly over platinum. This would be difficult from an ethical point of view, but it could reduce the West's dependency on the apartheid state. Although this never came to pass, De Wit's intriguing suggestion was mentioned in the citation for the Honorary Doctorate he received from Queens University (Kingston, Canada) in 1993. This award was one of multiple academic honours, all of which, it must be said, he wore lightly, as he did his association with the world's great educational institutions.

**ARTICLE INCLUDES:**  
 Peer review  
 Supplementary material

This architectural ability to explore the spaces between different fields of knowledge was to mark his life's work. What drove it was intellectual curiosity, an emancipatory politics and a deep concern for the future. But its anchor was geology – he never left the field and never stopped thinking about ways to explain humans and their interaction with the planet. Importantly, too, he never stopped reading in the natural sciences – but he also read far beyond them, and voraciously so.

**PUBLISHED:**  
27 May 2020

De Wit's early work on the Barberton Greenstone Belt and the evolution of Africa and Gondwana brought paradigmatic shifts in thinking on the young earth and the evolution of the continents. The Queens University citation called these 'fundamental contributions to the application of pure science to increase our understandings of the earth and assessment of its mineral endowment'. This work suggested that humans could only secure their future if their understanding of the Anthropocene was read against the geological notion of 'deep time'. The trick was to bring this thinking into all forms of knowledge. Could this happen in the university?

The record shows that building new academic institutions is very difficult. Invariably, academic disciplines push back against change, particularly change like De Wit's, which was difficult to pigeonhole within the organisational logic of the academy. Did he want to create a centre for research on social equality? Was it to be a unit for advocacy around climate change? Or was he proposing a graduate institute which published articles in the best geology journals which would be highly cited? What this was, of course, was transdisciplinarity at its finest. Clearly, Maarten de Wit had understood the centrality of the charge (not always fully understood) brought against higher education – 'people have problems, universities have faculties'. But with charm, scientific argument, and not a little plain speaking – for which the Dutch are famed – he persisted.

What helped to smooth the way was the label 'Earth Stewardship', the expanded role of science in society, and the engagement of publics in the reduction of rates of anthropogenic damage to the biosphere. This came to capture, if not quite a science in the orthodox sense, then certainly the spirit of the project. The Zulu word *lphakade*, 'to observe the present and consider the past to ponder the future', has been helpful in bringing the idea home.

The result was the creation, in mid-2006, of the Africa Earth Observatory Network (AEON). At the time, De Wit occupied the Phillipson–Stow Chair of Geology and Mineralogy at the University of Cape Town. In 2011, he moved to the Chair of Earth Stewardship Science at the Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, taking AEON with him. In this setting, AEON has reached out in an astonishing number of directions – many, but by no means all, centred on the Karoo. These range from groundbreaking geological research on the Cape Fold Belt, an in-depth exposition of shale gas exploration, to excavating Khoisan narratives and identity.

These topics suggest why AEON remains a captivating intellectual initiative and why it has been so enthusiastically embraced by young academics. Almost without exception, they have been drawn to AEON, not only by concern for the planet's future, but also by the infectious enthusiasm (and generosity) of Maarten de Wit – who placed students at the very centre of AEON's work. AEON is Maarten de Wit's gift to the academy – and the fulfilment of the promise he made to do something for Africa.

We spoke hours before the start of the Covid-19 lockdown: he was keen for us to write something together – as we had done decades before. Of course, this will not be possible now, but AEON must continue his life's work and his legacy.

If this is to succeed, De Wit's understandings of 'intellectual' must continue. The first of these is that scientific rigour – in whatever the field – matters the most. Second, the idea of 'science for society' needs to be more than a cliché. And finally, to change lives and to preserve the planet, is to understand humans in the context of their own and earth's stories.

## Reference

1. De Wit M. *Minerals and mining in Antarctica: Science and technology, economics and politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1985.

© 2020. The Author(s). Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.