

Lannation

spoken by the University Orator

Â» Professor W H Peters

BArch(Natal),MSc(Heriotâ\200\224Watt),Drâ\200\224lng(Hannover),ArchSA,MIArch

in presenting

KEITH HENRY COOPER

to the Acting Chancellor at the

Graduation Ceremony

held in Durban

on Friday, 4 April 2003

L]

UNIVERSITY OF NATAL \*@\*

Idâ\200\231

= %

DOCTOR OF LAWS (honoris causa)

KEITH HENRY COOPER

To put into context the achievements of Keith Henry Cooper, I am reminded of wisdom expressed by the self-educated Chinese philosopher, who lived from 551-

479BC, known by his latinized name, Confucius.

Tell people â\200\224 and they may forget;  
Show them â\200\224 they may remember;

but involve them and they will understand.

We all depend on the resources of the earth to sustain our lives, the most basic of which are air, water and food. The challenge is to achieve a South Africa which is wisely managed, by all, to ensure long-term environmental sustainability, and this aim cannot be achieved without the involvement of the communities who â\200\230buy in \*, as the parlance of today would have it. To this end, Keith Cooper has lived the mission statement of the Wildlife and Environment Society of Southern Africa (WESSA),

namely â\200\234to promote public participation in caring for the Earthâ\200\235.

While at high school, he registered as a junior member of the Wildlife Society and once employed with a finance house, he accepted the position of secretary of a branch. Combining his passion for nature with the administrative skills then acquired, he joined the combined organisation of the Oceanographic Research Institute of the University of Natal and the Durban Aquarium, as Administrative Officer, a position

he held for 11 years, 1961-72. When the position of Manager and Director of the

Wildlife Society became available, he successfully applied for this. Fortunately for Keith Cooper, this joint appointment became separated and in 1975 he was appointed

Conservation Director. From that time the activities of the Society and those of Keith Cooper became intertwined.

In negotiating his conditions of employment, he arranged for a minimum of one week of every month to be spent in the field. This week Keith Cooper reserved, not only for scientific investigation, but also for building bridges to the communities abutting conservancies.

At the time Cooper entered the Directorship of Conservation access to the government-run game reserves was restricted to whites. How then could the majority black population establish any concept for the needs of nature conservation? The Society realised that for environmental concerns to become accepted, a broad public had to become involved. Working on the assumption that teachers would be able to give a "multiplier effect", the Society began taking black trainee teachers on excursions, exposing them to nature and ecological principles. Cooper thus helped establish the highly successful African Conservation Education Project (ACE), which brought the Society much respect and a measure of international acclaim.

Marine estuaries and indigenous forests were the focus of his first conservation efforts and professional reports. One of his contributions is the publication *The Conservation Status of Indigenous Forests in Transvaal, Natal and Orange Free State* (1985) in which he quantified the rarity of our indigenous forests, which cover a mere one-third of a per cent of South Africa's surface area! Hence the controversial invasion by

squatters of the DukuDuku forest, and the subsequent resettlement arrangements put forward by Cooper.

During 1990 the Society identified the need for a comprehensive map and database of environmentally sensitive areas in KwaZulu-Natal. This was prepared as an "early warning system" by depicting environmentally sensitive elements on a single map, to serve as a planning and management tool for the authorities, developers and conservationists. While this challenge was in process, Cooper carried out the Transkei

Forest Survey (1992) and co-authored Studies in the Ecology of Maputaland.

Cooper is accredited with facilitating the first conservancies of contiguous farms in KwaZulu-Natal and in the Free State. He founded the "Bergwatch Coalition" a grouping of organisations dedicated to conserving the wilderness nature of the KZ-N and Lesotho Drakensberg. He proposed and lobbied for the declaration of no less than 15 nature reserves and protected areas, including in our immediate surround, Beachwood Mangroves Nature Reserve, Bluff and Umhlanga Lagoon and Palmiet and Roosfontein in Westville. Cooper was instrumental in proposing urban conservancies and the implementation of the Metropolitan Open Space System. First applied in Durban as "MOSS" at the beginning of 1981, this system for linking urban green "lungs" within metropolitan areas, was subsequently adopted in no fewer than 6

of the country's larger towns and cities.

Now that Cooper has retired after 30 years as Director of Conservation, he is active in the establishment of the Pondoland National Park on the Transkei coast. Interestingly,

this is the realisation of a dream he first articulated in his publication of 1977

Preliminary Survey of the Transkei Coast.

The University of Natal honours Keith Cooper for his considerable achievements in conserving South Africa's biodiversity, for his catalytic role in facilitating community

involvement; and his promoting of the progress of human society.

