

Conference in Africa a dream come true for Prof Koch



Prof Klaus Koch with the Executive Mayor of Cape Town, Ms Helen Zille, and the Minister of Science and Technology, Mr Mosibudi Mangena.

A dream of nearly two decades has come true for chemistry professor Klaus Koch, when the 37th International Conference on Coordination Chemistry (ICCC) was held in Cape Town in August under his chairmanship.

Also serving on the steering committee were Stellenbosch University's Marlene Milani, Prof Len Barbour and Dr Robert Lackay.

It has been 20 years since I first attended the 24th ICCC in Athens, when I was inspired with the idea to one day see an ICCC in South Africa.

The week-long conference was the biggest ever meeting of coordination chemists to be held in Africa, and saw 650 delegates from 60 countries discussing metals in biology, medicines, materials, nanostructures, devices, solutions, as well as coordination complexes in precious metals and photochemistry. Coordination chemists study the transition metal complex which forms when a metal is taken into a solution, such as water.

The plenary speakers included the 2005 Nobel Prize winner for Chemistry, Prof Robert Grubbs.

The 37th ICCC was the first event of its kind to be held in Africa since the inception of this series of meetings in the United Kingdom in 1950. Over the past five decades, the series of conferences has developed into one of the larger and longest continuously running international meetings of inorganic chemistry worldwide.

"It has been 20 years since I first attended the 24th ICCC in Athens, when I was inspired with the idea to one day see an ICCC in South Africa," Prof Koch explains.

"In 1988 at Porto, at the traditional working dinner of the Executive Planning Committee in which future venues were discussed, I asked why not South Africa?" he remembers. "I vividly recall Professor Stanley Kirschner (executive permanent secretary) asking me how old I was!"

The South African bid to host the 37th ICCC met with considerable competition from five other bidding countries, but was

selected unanimously in Florence in 1998. Since then, Prof Koch and his steering committee, which includes researchers from Stellenbosch, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Free State and the Western Cape, have been hard at work to ensure that everything goes according to plan.

"Although it is held on a smaller scale, for science in South Africa it is as major an event as the 2010 Soccer World Cup," Prof Koch explains.

He says that South Africa's richly endowed mineral wealth and the extraction of metals such as gold and platinum from ore rely fundamentally on coordination chemistry.

"The extraction of gold and the platinum metals would be inconceivable without an understanding of the specific coordination chemistry of these metals. The same goes for the numerous catalytic processes used by the unique coal-to-liquid fuel process perfected by Sasol in South Africa." m

Pine expert receives Swiss prize

The research initiative of ecologist Prof Dave Richardson, deputy director of the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence for Invasion Biology (CIB), received an early Christmas present when he was awarded the distinguished Hans Sigrist Prize in Bern, Switzerland, on 1 December.

The prize, valued at more than R560 000, is awarded for excellent work in a sector of science determined annually by the Council of the Hans Sigrist Foundation.

It honours his pioneering work over the last two decades on especially the impact that pines and other invasive trees have had on the biodiversity of Cape flora.

Prof Richardson, who is also professor in Ecology in the Department of Botany and Zoology, is the first recipient of this international prize to hail from Africa. In fact, he is the first prize winner not to hail from Europe or North America.

According to Prof Richardson, the award, and especially its acknowledgement of invasion biology as a field of study, reflects the growing world focus being placed on the influence of invasive species on natural biodiversity. m

Prof Dave Richardson (Foto: SSFD)

