



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

28 March 2017

UCT ecologist wins British Ecological Society prize

University of Cape Town (UCT) ecologist Gabriella Leighton has won a British Ecological Society (BES) Young Investigator prize. The prize – one of only five awarded each year – recognises the best research papers published in BES journals by early career scientists.

Leighton won the Robert May Prize for the best paper in the BES journal *Methods in Ecology & Evolution* in 2016 for her paper “Just Google it: assessing the use of Google Images to describe geographical variation in visible traits of organisms”.

The prize, which includes £250, a year’s BES membership plus a year’s subscription to the journal, will be presented at the British Ecological Society’s annual meeting in Ghent, Belgium in December.

It is awarded for an important contribution in converting one aspect of field ecology to a desktop science, and Leighton’s paper shows how Google can help make ecology cheaper, faster and safer in the future.

Many species are difficult, time-consuming and sometimes dangerous to observe, and well-trained fieldworkers are expensive to employ. Ecology would be much easier if we had better ways of observing species, and images taken by amateur and professional photographers, if geo-referenced, could be a rich source of ecological information.

Leighton analysed online image data across a range of species, from black bears in western North America to black sparrow hawks in South Africa, comparing data on their colour collected by fieldworkers with data from Google images, and found that the online images are a very reliable source of data.

To make the method accessible, Leighton’s paper also includes a web application, Morphic, that allows the approach to be widely implemented.

Leighton is currently an MSc student at UCT, where she did her BSc (Hons) in Biological Sciences supervised by Dr Arjun Amar (a co-author of her award-winning paper).

ENDS

For more information on the British Ecological Society and the Young Investigator prizes, visit www.britishecologicalsociety.org

The paper, "Just Google it: assessing the use of Google Images to describe geographical variation in visible traits of organisms" by Gabriella R. M. Leighton, Pierre S. Hugo, Alexandre Roulin, Arjun Amar (*Methods in Ecology and Evolution*, 7:9, pp 1060-1070), is available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/2041-210X.12562/full>

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Thami Nkwanyane

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5672
Fax: (021) 650 3780
Cell: (072) 563 9500
Email: thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za