

Bob Scholes (28 October 1957 - 28 April 2021)

The well-known quote "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants" is attributed to Isaac Newton in 1675. That citation does not say who those few Giants were at the time, but I know one of the contemporary Giants: Bob Scholes, Botanist and Systems Ecologist at heart, Nobel Peace Prize recipient for his contributions to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Distinguished Professor and Director of the Global Change Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, co-chair of the Conditions Working Group of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services assessment of Land Degradation, Foreign Associate of the US National Academy of Sciences, Fellow of the CSIR, Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa, Member of the South African Academy, Research Associate of the CSIR, NRF A-rated scientist, winner of the National Science and Technology Forum Lifetime Contribution to Science Award, and more. He contributed to countless committees and international organisations, promoting evidence-based policy making and stimulating coworkers and collaborators in the process.

A towering figure who projected a firm, sometimes imposing personality through pointed arguments in professional meetings, Bob was a very cheerful, optimistic individual with a great sense of humour. His sharp and inquisitive mind, coupled with a phenomenal memory, ensured he was curious of anything and everything. He was as interested in botany and quanta as in human paleontology and cosmology. He had read and evaluated so many documents that he was very well informed on many topics. In 1960, the Malian writer, historian and ethnologist Amadou Hampâté Bâ delivered a talk at Unesco in which he claimed, in essence, that "En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle." (In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns). Bob was not old, but he definitely was a walking library. I can't remember a topic on which he would not have a definite opinion, and I quickly found out that he was correct--almost all the time! Most importantly, he excelled at combining ideas from very diverse fields to propose a comprehensive understanding of complex situations. Being also very much grounded in common sense, adept at thinking outside of the box, and allergic to mediocrity, he would regularly cut futile exchanges short and come up with pragmatic solutions that made very much sense. Bob was always pushing himself to the limit, both intellectually and physically, and very demanding of his collaborators and students.

And yet, none of this can express the heartfelt empathy, deep caring and delicate attention the

man behind those titles and honours provided to his family, friends, colleagues and students. With his wife Mary and his son Stirling, Bob ran a most welcoming home, permanently available to neighbours and foreign visitors alike: their hospitality is legendary. Bob was a most dependable friend and a very sensitive individual who tended to the personal needs of everyone around him. He was also an excellent cook, with a knack for culinary explorations, as well as a fine connoisseur of wines and spirits. He fully embraced life and savoured loud parties as well as simple joys of quiet activities at home.

Bob was an indefatigable promoter of a multiethnic, multicultural, tolerant and open society, in particular in South Africa. He was also very skilled with tools and trades. In coherence with his philosophy, he installed solar panels on his Joburg home and took it off the power grid. He also designed and built, with the help of a few locals, his own perfectly functional, self-contained, environmentally-safe and climate-friendly house in Wakkerstroom, Mpumalanga.

Bob passed away while pursuing one of his great passions: walking and climbing the world, observing the tiniest plants and animals in their environment during the day while admiring the universe during the clear Southern African nights. We have lost a great friend and a mentor, but he showed us the way: it's now up to us to follow on his tracks, to climb on his shoulders, and aim to achieve the high expectations he placed on us.

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