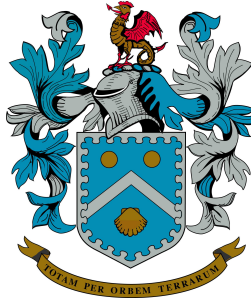


SOCIETY OF SOUTH AFRICAN GEOGRAPHERS

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO GEOGRAPHY STUDENTS AT THE STUDENTS' CONFERENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WITSWATERSRAND ON 12TH SEPTEMBER 2011

Good afternoon students and friends.

I wish to thank the Organizing Committee of the 2011 Conference for inviting me to address the Students today.

Also, on behalf of the Society of South African Geographers as a whole, and the Council of SSAG in particular, I wish to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks and appreciation to the Wits' School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies for hosting the 2011 Geography Students' Conference.

More especially, we wish to thank Dr. Gijsbeth Hoogendoorn and the Students' Organizing Committee at Wits for their great and fantastic effort in organizing this Conference – thank you. Wits has long been a powerhouse in Geography and Environmental Studies in South Africa and I am sure that all of us welcome the opportunity to be here this week.

I wish to also express our thanks and appreciation to Dr. Dan Hammett and Simon Gear for accepting the Conference's invitation to present keynote addresses. Previous to this week, I had the distinct pleasure to sit in at two of Dr. Hammett's presentations and I found both of these most enjoyable and academically stimulating. I look forward to Simon Gear's presentation tomorrow. We are privileged to have the opportunity to hear such exhilarating young geographers as Dan Hammett and Simon Gear.

It is indeed a special privilege for me to be present here today amongst the cream of South Africa's young geographers. Allow me, on behalf of the Society, to congratulate all of you for taking the time, and making the effort, to come and share your research and your academic work with your peers from across the country.

I wish to extend my sincere thanks to each of you for the effort you have put into your preparation for your presentations here this week. I would like with you, also to thank the many people and institutions who have collectively supported you as you prepared for this conference: your academic supervisors, your peers, your Departments and Universities, family and friends.

Your attendance at this conference will – for each of you - long remain a treasured memory. I hope you enjoy the conference immensely, part-take thoroughly of the camaraderie and fellowship that the conference provides, and for long, share in – and reflect on - the academic challenges to which you are provoked.

There are approximately 103 papers that are being presented at this Conference. These papers cut across a broad range of topics and sub-disciplines in the field of Geography and Environmental Science. They talk to the rich diversity that transcends our discipline; they hold the promise of a bright future as many of them seek to confront the multifaceted challenges of our time.

Many of us who were lulled by the euphoria that South Africa experienced with the transition to a post-apartheid society have been quickly and rudely sobered at the tremendous challenges we face today. As university students, you constitute a particularly privileged cohort of the population, and some of you - by virtue of being postgraduate students - comprise an even more select grouping within the country.

You therefore have an immense responsibility in your own walk in life and in the varied professions you enter, to provide the necessary leadership and direction to help build a truly nonracial and peaceful society with respect and dignity for all. Each of you has been blessed and endowed with your own special gifts and talents, and each of you will function in your own unique environment.

Human agency can be extremely powerful, and you will be called upon – if not already – to be the fulcrum, to be the nucleus, around whom others can galvanize in making our beloved country a better environment in which to live and work. As a community of geographers we need also to draw strength and fortitude from one another, and link up with our colleagues on campus and elsewhere, in challenging the tremendous ills that confront society at large. We cannot be neutral, or in Ed Soja's words, "politically numb".

I recall making my final student presentation at the Geography conference in Cape Town in September 1976. As we drove into Cape Town for the conference that Year we were greeted with the sad news that persons had been shot and killed by the police that morning in the city. The class of 1976 accused their elders for being silent for too long

against the ills that pervaded society then. History must not repeat itself, and I hope that when the final role is taken each of you will have been counted for contributing positively to a better South Africa.

As a child of apartheid and as one born in the late 1940s – almost at the time that the then National Party assumed political power in South Africa in 1948 - and now as one slowly approaching the twilight of his career, I wish to say that I often look back with joy and pride at my years at university.

They were personally difficult and challenging years, but they were also filled with clean fun, enthusiasm, opportunities, happiness and much of the simple things in life. Time passes quickly and your days at university fast tick away. Amidst all the hard work that goes with being a university student, namely, the assignments, tests, examinations and for some of you - the demands of writing a dissertation - make sure that you enjoy your youth, your friends and particularly your family. Life can often be too short, not to enjoy the peace, calmness and tranquility of each day. You owe this to yourself.

As a young student during the height of the apartheid regime, I faced innumerable and difficult challenges in carving out my career. However, with the dawn of the post-apartheid era in South Africa, immense opportunities to study have opened up for university students at large.

Loans and fellowships, bursaries and grants, are more readily available today than ever before. The country has a dire need for skilled persons. Collectively you constitute amongst the finest young minds the country has. I want to encourage you to take every opportunity you can to enhance and improve yourself, academically and otherwise.

I firmly believe that when each individual member of society grows and improves, there are collective benefits for all. For some of you, I trust that you will defer your immediate wants for the benefits that accrue from longer term endeavours.

I wish to end this presentation by referring briefly to some critical issues.

First, the next Geography Students and Academic Conference is set for Cape Town in June 2012, just nine months away. The student and academic conference will be held in the same week. I trust that many of you will be able to attend that conference too and have the opportunity to interact with a larger number of persons in the geographic community.

Second, Ms. Melanie Nicolau, the Head of Geography at UNISA and a member of Council, has prepared an outstanding document, comprising some 72-pages that showcase each of the Geography and Environmental Science Departments and Schools in the country. This is an extremely valuable resource document that records the details

of each academic in each department in the country, and lists the publications of each department as well.

I sincerely hope that you will be able to download this document so that you may be able to identify the various experts in the various sub-disciplines in Geography and Environmental Science and seek to work with them if you are particularly interested in a field of research whose expertise lies outside your own institution.

Third, the Society of South African Geographers is due to celebrate its centenary celebrations in 2015-2016. We are hoping that this momentous occasion will take place in Stellenbosch, where the first Society of Geography in the country was established. For now, Professor Gustav Visser of Free State University has been invited to edit a book to help celebrate this historic event. I will like to invite the South African Geography Students to consider how they may collectively input into making this occasion a grand and memorable event.

Fourth, at a Council meeting some four years ago, Professor Ron Davies, one of the leading human geographers in the country in the recent past, reported that the South African Geography Students Annual meeting represents perhaps one of the most remarkable geographical meetings in the world. He stated that no other country has continuously held on an annual basis, and for so long, a students' geography conference. All of you share this glorious record, and I wish to congratulate each of you for the role you are collectively playing in advancing this remarkable record.

Finally, youth organizations and youth leaders have recently featured prominently in the various media. In some arenas in society the youth have become increasingly vocal. The time has arrived too for younger geographers like you to begin to infuse new blood and ideas into the Society of South African Geographers.

As a community of younger geographers you have a critical role to play in helping to shape the direction and path of the SSAG. We have deliberately kept student membership of the Society down to a minimum of R75.00 per annum, and I hope that each of you is a member of the parent body.

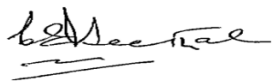
More importantly, several vacant positions on the ten-person Council have arisen of late, and these will need to be filled at the June 2012 Cape Town Conference. We need your critical input as young geographers to help advance the discipline at large and the particular interests of the young geography community.

For some reason, younger geographers seem to have been excluded from the organizational and institutional structures of the parent body. Suffice it to say that as the current President of the SSAG, I am asking that during your deliberations at this Conference, you consider as a body how you can become increasingly involved in matters pertaining to SSAG.

For example, you may wish to constitute an Organizing Committee to take this process forward. The SSAG has the financial resources to support a well founded, structured and organized Youth wing in Geography and Environmental Science. I hope that you will rise to this challenge.

On behalf of the Council of the Society of South African Geographers, I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate all of you once again and wish each of you every success.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cecil Seethal', with a horizontal line underneath.

Cecil Seethal
(President: SSAG)
(12 September 2011)