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16 May 2022

## UCT students among global young leaders in Antarctica Expedition tackling climate change

A sudden hailstorm at sea in the Antarctic while studying glaciers from a Zodiac inflatable would unnerve any adventurer. For the unseasoned visitor, rapid weather changes in the south polar region can be especially alarming, said University of Cape Town (UCT) humanities student Madina Mothupi.

Mothupi was one of two UCT student participants on the recent 2041 ClimateForce Antarctica Expedition: 150 leaders from 38 nations who joined Robert Swan's Leadership on the Edge programme. Her counterpart was Catherine Dunn from the Faculty of Commerce.

The programme teaches participants about the frozen continent and its uniqueness and fragility in the face of climate change. It's designed to equip them with the tools they need to raise awareness of the urgent need to protect Antarctica, and conserve it as a pristine, development-free wilderness.

### Intersection of past and present

Fortunately, the experienced crew were prepared for rapid weather changes. As the hailstorm hit the expeditioners in open sea, it was action time. The Zodiacs raced back to the ship, the *Ocean Victory*, a fuel-efficient, completely sustainable and environmentally friendly vessel, said Mothupi.

"Our Zodiac was bouncing off the sea. I was holding on for dear life, hoping I wouldn't fall overboard. We were wearing heavy lifejackets but got completely drenched." But, it was an important lesson about the vagaries of Antarctic conditions.

It had taken Mothupi more than 48 hours travelling via three continents to get to the expedition's polar ship at Ushuaia, Argentina, on South America's southernmost peninsula. Mothupi had travelled 'hopscoth' from Johannesburg to Ushuaia, touching down in Zurich, Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires along the way. In Ushuaia, the travellers acclimatised to snow and ice before setting sail south.

Antarctica held Mothupi in its thrall from the moment she stepped onto the ice, wearing the sterilised boots issued on arrival.

“It’s a frozen desert, inhospitable, but the marine life is so diverse,” she said in an interview after arriving back in South Africa. “I had a feeling of exhilaration just being there, as not many people get this privilege. It’s also an intersection of past and present; so many famous historical explorers have been there. But at the same time, it’s at risk.”

The expedition and education programme on Antarctica also took the teams out to experience the realities of the landscape. They did a lot of hiking, which Mothupi found tough going.

“Some of the hikes and trails were quite challenging.” At times she felt herself sinking into the snow, and needed help from teammates. “And that’s what really made me appreciate the value of teamwork – without them, I couldn’t have reached the top of some of the hiking points.”

A highlight was a visit to the volcano on Deception Island. With 138 volcanoes, Antarctica’s geology and geography are ‘red-hot’ with volcanic activity.

The continent’s wildlife is also astounding, said Mothupi; from the miniscule krill to the large whales that feed off these tiny creatures, as well as the different species of penguins, seals and seabirds.

### **Climate change campaigners**

Back in Cape Town, Mothupi (like her UCT counterpart on the expedition, Dunn, who was sponsored by UCT’s oceanography department) is intent on implementing climate change initiatives. A member of UCT’s Green Campus Initiative, Mothupi plans to start by visiting schools to share the message. She is also keen to target the corporate sphere, by encouraging businesses to implement carbon-removal technologies.

The diversity of the Leadership on the Edge group in Antarctica was reflected in their multipronged approach to mitigation, said Mothupi.

“We were all there to explore how we could implement our own ways of fighting climate change. There were those in the finance sector talking about divestment from fossil fuels, while those in science were working on renewable energy and ways of reducing carbon emissions. We had artists who were communicating [the conservation message] via their artworks, and also mobilising people to film documentaries. We had a member of the Indian government, talking about changing policymaking around climate change.”

*Story by Helen Swingler, UCT News*



Madina Mothupi



Catherine Dunn

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***Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department***

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