



*Prof. Hamish Spencer, Director, Allan Wilson Centre - Editorial June 2015*

Some of you will be aware of the news that the AWC's application for continued funding in the latest Centre of Research Excellence (CoRE) round was unsuccessful. This result means that the AWC will close at the end of this year, and the support for our science projects and outreach programmes will cease.

I have to say I am extremely disappointed by this outcome, but I am not alone. Massey Vice Chancellor, Professor Steve Maharey wrote, "The Government's decision to end funding for the CoRE is not easy to understand given the outstanding record established by the AWC." The quality of our research and personnel was never in doubt. Our scientists are at the cutting edge of world-class research and are among New Zealand's finest: we count 8 Fellows of the Royal Society of New Zealand among our 21 Investigators, a proportion greater than any other CoRE.

It is widely acknowledged that the Allan Wilson Centre's outreach is outstanding. The review panel that evaluated our proposal described our interactions with Māori as "exemplary." And the scientists who come to New Zealand as part of our International Speaker Series reach about 10% of the population through a combination of public lectures, radio interviews and magazine articles.

Professor Maharey believes that an intention to fund new CoREs meant the AWC missed out. This conclusion, if right, is very worrying. CoREs should be about excellence, not about giving everyone a turn; by their nature, CoREs should be carrying out the very best science.

It seems to me, however, that there is a more likely explanation and one that is ultimately of even greater concern. There is now no CoRE whose primary focus is on New Zealand's biodiversity and that is part of a trend of reducing scientific research funding in that area. Readers will be familiar with the decisions to reduce Department of Conservation research capabilities. Even more recently the Biodiversity Science Challenge was subsumed (in a cabinet-level decision) into the Biological Heritage Challenge, which now appears to be dominated by agricultural and bioprotection research. Scarily, all this is happening at a time when our biodiversity is under unprecedented pressure, with widespread scientific concern for our country's future.

I do not want to finish on a down note, so let me say that our next two speakers in the International Speaker Series are among our very best. Harvard University's Scott Edwards, recently elected to the elite American National Academy of Sciences, and New Zealander Tom Higham, now at Oxford, are both accomplished scientists and riveting speakers. I urge you to come to their talks: they will be opportunities not to be missed!