

# SCIENCE IS Everywhere But Nobody Knows It

There exists a huge disparity in how the public in urban and rural areas experience and interpret science.

A study by researchers from the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University, funded by the National Research Foundation, has found that there is a large difference in how urban community members perceive and interpret science compared to their counterparts in rural areas. The 2015 Science Engagement Framework of the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) emphasises the need to popularise science, enhance science literacy and develop a critical and engaging public, however most of the proposed strategies focus on urban areas, a surprising development since the Department's previous White Paper on Science and Technology (1996) explicitly highlighted rural publics. With approximately one third of South Africa's population living in rural areas, the country has a very large population that has been under-served in terms of science engagement.

Research has found that urban publics are predominantly more literate and educated with

access to a greater amount of sources for scientific information while rural publics tend towards being less literate, less educated and with lower incomes and fewer sources available for scientific information.

The research project focused on the publics in two types of rural communities – agricultural (Clanwilliam) and fishing towns (Paternoster) with no obvious connection to any science, and two towns that became famous internationally for the large scientific installations in their vicinity – Sutherland, which hosts the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT) and Carnarvon, which hosts the Square Kilometre Array (SKA). It is believed that, due to the impact that the large scientific installations have had on the communities, science may play a stronger role in the lives of community members.

The findings showed that there are different rural publics, but they are not all automatically culturally distant to science. Those with higher levels of education and who have spent at least some time in urban environments displayed the smallest distance to science

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but, surprisingly, also have strong reservations towards increasing taxes for the benefit of science. The more moderately educated respondents in the study had an average interest and exposure to science (mostly indirect) and took a more middle position. Those with lower levels of education and no urban experience showed the greatest distance to science yet strongly supported increasing taxes to benefit science. It was also found that only respondents from Sutherland and Carnarvon realised that science can actually create jobs. The publics

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of Caranarvon and Sutherland also differed between each other, which the researchers put down to SALT having been established longer than the SKA; it being open to the public; and its location being closer to the town than SKA (which lay about 100 km from Carnarvon and is generally not open to the public).

The researchers hope to see their findings utilised in the development of communication strategies designed to meet the needs of the specific publics of the country and to reach rural publics more effectively. 

