

Scripps researcher awarded Symons Gold Medal

SAN DIEGO: Britain's Royal Meteorological Society has awarded Tim Barnett, an emeritus research marine geophysicist at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC San Diego, its Symons Gold Medal, the society's premier award.



It is the first time in the history of the award that a Scripps scientist has received the honour. The society, founded in 1851, will formally present the medal during its annual general meeting in London on 15 May 2013.

"I'm stunned, but extremely honoured to receive the Symons," said Barnett. "The prior awardees were truly the giants in the field and I feel very humble to be in such august company."

Barnett has been a leader of modern efforts to improve the understanding of climate through computer models and advanced statistical methods. His use of the analysis method known as "detection and attribution" led Barnett and fellow Scripps researcher David Pierce to conclude that ocean warming trends in the second half of the 20th century could only be attributed to the influence of human activities rather than natural phenomena. Their first evidence of this causal relationship appeared in 2001.

Barnett and Pierce's 2008 prediction that Lake Mead, a crucial water supply source for much of the south western United States, could run dry in only a few decades without changes in water use, garnered worldwide attention and led to reassessments of how the supply should be managed.

The award is named for George Symons FRS, a 19th century meteorologist noted for his creation of a vast rainfall measurement network throughout the United Kingdom. It was established in 1901 in Symons' memory. The medal is awarded biennially for distinguished work in connection with meteorological science.

Vocal leader among international scientific community

According to the society's citation: "Dr. Barnett has contributed a large number of ground-breaking and highly influential scientific results that have fundamentally changed our view of climate variability, predictability, and change. From being among the original group of scientists who quantified and executed [El Niño Southern Oscillation] predictions to launching first studies of the dynamics of decadal climate variability to recent high-profile work with water resource predictions under global change scenarios, Barnett has been a vocal leader both among the international scientific community and within the public outreach, government, and policy sectors. Few careers in our fields of physical oceanography, atmospheric science and climate dynamics have had such continuing and far-reaching impacts in so many ways. Quantifying his influence is impossible, but one can quickly demonstrate that his H-Index (N papers cited N times) is 52 and that his total citation count exceeds 8,000. He has published more than 230 papers.

"Dr. Barnett retired from full-time research a few years ago, but has been incredibly active in part-time work here at Scripps since then. He intends to fully retire soon. Considering his stature, he has won surprisingly few awards, the most distinguished being the Sverdrup Gold Medal of the American Meteorological Society and a share of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize as part of the IPCC. He is a Fellow of the AMS and AGU. He is eminently worthy of the prestigious Symons Medal."

A native of California, Barnett attended Pomona College in Claremont, Calif. and received a BA in physics and mathematics. He received his MS and PhD in oceanography from Scripps in 1966.

He worked as manager of the Ocean Physics Department at Westinghouse Electric Corporation in San Diego until 1971 when he returned to Scripps as the academic administrator for the North Pacific Experiment (NORPAX). NORPAX studied the interactions of the North Pacific Ocean and the overlying atmosphere on climatic time scales. In 1975 he joined the Scripps Climate Research Division.

Barnett also has worked as an oceanographic consultant for Marine Advisers in La Jolla, Calif., and as an oceanographer for the US Naval Oceanographic Office in Washington, DC.

He has testified before the US Congress and the German Bundestag and served as an advisor to congress and other governmental agencies on US ocean and climate activities. He has served on numerous National Academy of Sciences panels including the Climate Research Committee and the US Advisory Panel for the Tropical Ocean/Global Atmosphere program. He is a member of several national and international scientific advisory committees.

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