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Mountain Man

It’s not every day you get a mountain named in your honor. But UC Santa Barbara’s Bruce Luyendyk, a professor emeritus of earth science, can claim exactly that rare accolade.

Mount Luyendyk, as the peak is now known, is situated in Antarctica’s remote Fosdick Mountains, a place the tectonics expert knows well from his years conducting field research there.

It was two of Luyendyk’s former Ph.D. students, Christine Siddoway and Chris Sorlien, who proposed the commemorative name, which the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) officially adopted January 19.

“Fundamentally, it is Bruce’s research contributions to West Antarctica and science advocacy over 25 years that make him deserving of a place name designation,” said Siddoway.

For his part, Luyendyk said he is “pleasantly surprised and humbled” by the honor. When asked to describe the location of his mountain, Luyendyk joked, “You go to Hawaii and turn left. Then at the bottom of the world, you’re there.”

In fact, Mount Luyendyk is about 800 miles from McMurdo Station, the U.S. Antarctic research center. “You land in a snow field where no one has ever landed before with six weeks of supplies,” Luyendyk said, describing the challenges of doing research in a remote location. “One thing most people don’t realize is that you are completely, absolutely on your own in the middle of nowhere. It’s enthralling and unnerving at

the same time.”

Siddoway joined Luyendyk as part of a team of six (four geologists and two mountaineers) in 1989. The group was trying to determine the origin of the Fosdick Mountains and nearby ranges. “We were trying to figure out the story of the birth of these mountain ranges along the coast of the Pacific, because we knew that New Zealand had ripped off this part of Antarctica,” Luyendyk explained. “On the New Zealand side, the earth surface sunk, but on the Antarctic side, the surface went up. We were trying to figure out when, where and how these mountains formed.”

Spending six weeks living in an 8-foot-by-8-foot tent in one of the most isolated parts of the earth tends to bring camaraderie and challenges in equal measures. Siddoway and Luyendyk remember the trip fondly, though at the time Mother Nature had her own ideas.

“We were in the region working for a few weeks, and we went over to one location near the mountain, then known as ‘1070,’” Luyendyk recalled. “We had stunning weather. Low humidity, so you could see forever. We had a great day on Christmas Eve where we did some exploring. A couple days later, a horrendous blizzard came in, followed by fog, so we couldn’t go anywhere and couldn’t get out for several days. It was spectacular and overwhelming, both with good experiences and some severe weather that you never forget.”

Luyendyk returned to the same area for another expedition in 1990. Siddoway, now a professor of geology at Colorado College, has continued to work in Antarctica. It was a trip in 2010 that inspired her to submit Luyendyk’s name to the BGN. “Arriving by air to work on this mountain again, the magnificent view made me feel suddenly nostalgic about my beginnings,” she explained. “After that visit, I developed the idea that this summit might suitably commemorate the scientific achievements of Bruce Luyendyk.”

One such achievement resulted from the 1989 research, when Luyendyk and his team discovered an important piece of the mystery surrounding the initial formation of the Fosdicks and surrounding ranges. “We figured out that there was an unusual amount of heat in the mantle that centralized over the Antarctic side,” said Luyendyk. “That basically started the engine that created the asymmetry between these mountains and the New Zealand side.”

So, Bruce Luyendyk not only has a mountain named after him, but he knows how it got there. He said that he has no current plans to visit his mountain, but if he did make the long journey to Mount Luyendyk, he would plant a flag featuring the UCSB wave on its summit.

“I’d love to go back, but that’s for young people,” Luyendyk chuckled.

About UC Santa Barbara

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