



In Memoriam: Douglas Merkler and Cheryl Palm

April 4, 2024

Douglas Merkler

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Douglas James Merkler, a 23rd year member of SSSA, passed away on Jan. 17, 2024, in Boulder City, NV, with his beloved wife, Lois (Alexander) Merkler, by his side. He was 67 years old. He was born on June 22, 1956, in Seattle, WA.

Merkler attended the University of Nevada–Reno, graduating in 1979 with a B.S. in Soil Science. After graduation, he joined the USDA Soil Conservation Service, now NRCS, where he spent just shy of 39 years before his retirement. There he served in a number of positions, rising to the Resource Soil Scientist for the State of Nevada. Upon his retirement in 2017, he and Lois started a business, Aerial M2, LLC, so that he could continue his love for mapping landscapes.

During his career, he mapped more than 2 million acres of soil–plant assemblages across much of Nevada. In 2004, he received the Soil Scientist of the Year Award from the USDA; he was extremely proud and humbled to be awarded this national award. He was a member of many professional societies in addition to SSSA.

Some of Merkler's favorite activities were to be out in the field teaching and mentoring young people. He participated for many years in Nevada Youth Range Camp where he taught the soil section of their curriculum. He assisted Lois with many of her field classes, again teaching them about soil, plants, and maps. Mostly, he liked to be “out” in his beloved state of Nevada doing astronomy, fly fishing, or talking soils.

Cheryl Palm



Cheryl Palm

The world lost a leading light of agroforestry, agronomy, soil science, and ecology on Jan. 24, 2024 when Dr. Cheryl Ann Palm passed away at the age 70. Over her 45-year career, Cheryl dedicated her research to “***incorporating soil biological and ecological processes and principles into agricultural production and environmental management***.” Her impacts were global, but her focus was largely on the tropics, tackling critical issues related to food security and sustainable development long before these were common terms. She was deeply committed to supporting farmers with science while also pursuing exciting, new research questions

and tools. Her collaborations were truly interdisciplinary—she worked with

agronomists, nutritionists, geographers, sociologists, and economists. Her rigorous research had a large impact on sustainable approaches to managing soil organic matter, nutrient cycling, agroforestry, and agricultural intensification. Cheryl was known for her visionary, strong, and decisive leadership of numerous large, complex scientific research projects such as Vital Signs, Millennium Village Scientific Assessment, Tropical Soil Biology and Fertility, and Alternatives to Slash&Burn.

The impact of her research was exceeded only by her global impact as a mentor and role model for young scientists. She championed young women in science, making them feel empowered and seen. Cheryl lived in the moment, giving whoever she was with her undivided attention despite a chronically busy schedule. She trained a generation of young scientists to be daring, independent, and strong. She modeled the capacity to have fun while simultaneously working on exciting research questions. She gave us the tools needed to scale the ivory towers of academia (or not) and maintain a strong sense of purpose and worth—making sure to ask questions that had real-world implications for farmers across the globe. She trained us to be mentors ourselves. She invested in our autonomy. She removed barriers to allow us to take on challenges—scientific and cultural—as we learned new languages, built new tools, and made new discoveries. Cheryl pushed us to be better people and better scientists. She believed in us, and we trusted her, so we believed in ourselves.

Cheryl was a dynamo of creativity, dedication, and love. She is painfully missed by so many, especially her loving family and her husband, Dr. Pedro Sanchez. Her positive influence on science and scientists and farmers and farming worldwide will be felt for generations to come.

—submitted by Drs. Katherine Tully and Raymond R. Weil

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