

Obituary



Joan G. Ehrenfeld: A commemoration by her family
1948–2011

Dr. Joan Ehrenfeld, an expert on invasive species, wetlands ecology, and urban ecology, died at her home in Highland Park, New Jersey, on 25 June 2011 after a yearlong battle with acute leukemia. She spent her 35-year career as a Rutgers University professor of ecology, studying plant communities in both New Jersey's wildest and most settled places, from the Pine Barrens to the urban wetlands of Rahway. She was recognized around the world as a leading voice on plant ecology.

Born in New York City, Dr. Ehrenfeld began her career early when she was chosen for a National Science Foundation-sponsored program for high school students and spent a summer working in a Barnard College research laboratory. She earned a bachelor's degree, magna cum laude, in biology from

Barnard in 1969, and then earned a master's degree from Harvard in 1970 and a Ph.D. from the City University of New York in 1975.

Dr. Ehrenfeld balanced her dynamic scientific career with the raising of four children. She began her

career at Rutgers in 1976 as an assistant research professor in the Center for Coastal and Environmental Studies. She directed the New Jersey Water Resources Research Institute of the U.S. Geological Survey from 1990 to 2009, first in the Institute for Marine and Coastal Sciences, and then, starting in 1997, as a full professor in the Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Natural Resources.

Her career was marked by boundless curiosity and a wide range of professional interests. Among other things, she conducted studies on urban wetlands, restoration ecology, invasive plants in numerous habitats, and the effects of heavy metals in wetland soils; some of her recent work examined the role of biodiversity in the spread of West Nile Virus.

Wearing her trademark hat, a tan baseball cap with the words “Plays in the Dirt” embroidered above the brim, she taught legions of students the art of field science. Whether she was camping overnight with students at a Rutgers Field Station or helping them analyze their data in the lab, she was a role model for undergraduates, grad students, and postdoctoral fellows, proving through her example that it is possible for a woman to raise a family and also be a leader in the sciences.

Despite the demands and rigors of a career in science, Dr. Ehrenfeld always put her family first. She was inexhaustible, returning from long days in the field or lab to cook dinners from scratch, help with homework, and juggle the needs of four children. She devoted weekends to family activities and instilled a great love in her children for the things she, too, loved most: wilderness, music, theater, and opera. She delighted in being a grandmother, sharing the same books, songs, and games with her three grandchildren that she had filled her children’s lives with years before.

Dr. Ehrenfeld was never happier than when she was outdoors, preferably deep in the mud and green silence of a cedar swamp. She organized weekend hiking trips with her husband, David Ehrenfeld, also a Rutgers biology professor, and any children or friends who could be brought along. She invited her students on hikes and canoe trips, setting a pace that was challenging for people 20 years her junior.

In one recent study, she used citizen science as a method of investigating the responses of native vegetation to invasive species, training groups of hikers to monitor species along New York and New Jersey trails.

A generous colleague, Dr. Ehrenfeld collaborated widely with others on her research and was recognized by her peers for her distinction as a scientist, teacher, and leader. She received numerous awards, including the 2011 Research Excellence Award from the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences at Rutgers, the Cook College 2003 Research Excellence and Impact Award, and the 1999 Cook College Academic Professional Excellence Award for Academic Innovation and Creativity. In 2000, she was elected a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and in 2010 she was elected a Fellow of the Society of Wetland Scientists.

An assiduous grant writer, Dr. Ehrenfeld brought in millions of dollars over her career to support ecological research. In the years between 2005 and 2010 alone, she raised \$2.1 million in grant funding from the EPA, NSF, USDA, NJDEP, and other public and private sources.

She served the scientific community in many ways: she was a member of National Science Foundation

panels, served as a member of the National Research Council Committee on Independent Scientific Review of Everglades Restoration Progress, reviewed articles for many journals, and was selected as a member of the Science Advisory Board of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Her graduate students and postdoctoral students went on to occupy research and government positions around the world.

In demand as a speaker on many ecological topics, she has delivered invited lectures across the United States and around the world, in such locations as Bangalore, India; Lunteren, the Netherlands; Cuiaba, Brazil; and Beijing and Xiamen, in China.

Her passion for science was matched only by the organization and determination that she brought to her work.

The author or coauthor of over 120 scientific papers, she continued working on data analysis, advising students, and collaborating with others throughout her battle with leukemia. Her hospital room always filled with classical music, she worked through all the miseries of chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant. Since her diagnosis in April 2010, she was the author or coauthor of more than a dozen scientific publications, including five book chapters.

Dr. Ehrenfeld was a lover of music, singing in the Highland Park Choir and playing piano, and a leader in her Jewish community. She is survived by her brother, Robert Gardner; husband, David Ehrenfeld; her children, Kate Gardoqui and her husband Daniel Gardoqui; Jane Dimyan-Ehrenfeld and her husband Michael Dimyan; Jonathan Ehrenfeld and his wife Emily Ford, and Samuel Ehrenfeld; and three grandchildren, and mourned by countless friends, relatives, and colleagues. Donations in her memory may be made to the [New York–New Jersey Trail Conference](#).
