

In memoriam: Dr. Rebecca Reyburn Sharitz

by Loretta Battaglia

“‘Wat? A Voman?’ (What? A Woman?)” This was the question and challenge posed by a certain senior professor of Germanic origin to a female field ecologist at the beginning of her career many years ago. When Becky met this man as a new graduate student, he suggested that she might be better off developing secretarial skills rather than adhering to her chosen curriculum of science courses. Fortunately, none of the young women to which he gave similar advice listened and instead formed a loose organization to support one another, named the “VAV” society. One of the inaugural members was Dr. Rebecca Sharitz.

Dr. Sharitz, known as “Becky” to her friends, students, and colleagues, began her career at Roanoke College (B.S. Botany, 1966) and followed up at the University of North Carolina (Ph.D. Ecology, 1970). Her first academic positions were at St. Andrews Presbyterian College and then Saginaw Valley College before arriving at the University of Georgia’s Savannah River Ecology Laboratory in 1972, where she spent the remainder of her career.

Becky’s career was an illustrious one. She became a world-renowned expert on southeastern US floodplains

and isolated wetlands. She authored or co-authored more than 160 peer-reviewed papers or chapters, co-edited three books, and was the recipient of over 40 significant research grants. Most notably, her research was the first to demonstrate important linkages between hydrologic characteristics and wetland forest regeneration following thermal releases from nuclear reactors, alteration from dams, and tropical storm events.

She served as Vice President and Treasurer of the Ecological Society of America, Vice President and Secretary-General of the International Association for Ecology (INTECOL) and as a panel member on four National Academy of Science committees. She was awarded the Meritorious Teaching Award by the Association of Southeastern Biologists and the Friends of Congaree National Park, Order of the Cypress. She was elected as a Society of Wetland Scientists Fellow and received the prestigious National Wetlands Award in Science Research by the Environmental Law Institute. Of all her achievements, Becky was most proud of the graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and volunteers that she mentored and trained.

Photo of Becky Sharitz in the field.
Photo courtesy of Linda Lee.



Photo of Becky (center) playing a game during fieldtrip to Congaree Swamp National Park.
Photo courtesy of Priscilla Titus.



Becky Sharitz, Professor and Senior Research Ecologist at the University of Georgia's Savannah River Ecology Laboratory, passed away on October 20, 2018. She was a true pioneer in her field of wetland ecology; she helped to launch the careers of many and left behind an impressively long trail of accomplishments. ■

WHAT A WOMAN! INDEED!

"She made all the difference in my life. I will miss her forever."

—Loretta Battaglia

Excerpt from Adrienne Edwards' written account of a stormy night with Becky as they navigated their way out of the Congaree Swamp:

"Did you know that in some areas of shallow standing water, you can see the footprints of recent travellers floating up like ghosts? The bubbles of swamp gas carry up tiny bits of dust that create floating shadows on the water's surface."

—Adrienne Edwards, 1990

"I feel sure that Becky's footsteps are floating there still."

—Adrienne Edwards, 2018

Photo of Patricia Werner (left) and Becky Sharitz (right), two members of the "VAV" club, on a fieldtrip to the Northern Territory, Australia, 1981. The two often travelled together in the early days, including to the (then) Soviet Union, the UK, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. Scientific conferences were focus of these trips, but they also found time to climb Ayers Rock (Uluru) in Australia, land in an airplane on a NZ glacier and to fly faster than sound in a SST Concord. Photo courtesy of Pat Werner.



President Arnold van der Valk and Ian Bredin and others have been discussing an Africa initiative for a wetlands network and capacity development program.

Following this idea, Arnold van der Valk attended the National Wetlands Indaba (South African conference between or with native peoples) in Kimberley, South Africa, to discuss potential ways of linking or affiliating the South Africa Wetland Society with SWS. During the discussion of such a potential affiliation at the South African Wetland Society's annual business meeting, there was strong support for developing a formal link between the two societies. The SWS Executive Board will develop a protocol for a new category of membership, "affiliated society." Once this protocol has been developed and approved by the Board of Directors, it will be presented at the 2019 Indaba for approval by the South African Wetland Society. It is anticipated that many other national and regional wetland societies will also become affiliated with SWS in the future. Such affiliations with wetland societies around the world would do a great deal to internationalize SWS. More on this in a future president's address.

Preparations are underway for the SWS annual meeting in Baltimore, and symposia, field trips, talks and abstracts are taking shape. Please be sure to register for the meeting at www.swsannualmeeting.org. All the best for a great year in 2019. ■