Dr. Cheryl Palm, Professor

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Over the years, Cheryl's work took her to Borneo, Brazil, Peru, Kenya, and 10 different other countries in Africa, as well as to conferences all over the world.

Cheryl earned her B.S (1976, summa cum laude) and M.A. (1980) at the University of California, Davis. After graduating, Cheryl took off for Borneo to do research on orangutans, which is where she developed her deep love of rainforests. Her science career focused on tropical deforestation, land use, and the global carbon cycle while she was a research assistant at The Ecosystems Center (Marine Biological Lab, Woods Hole. Massachusetts 1979-1983). In 1986, she presented a seminal paper "The effect of tropical deforestation on atmospheric CO2" that gained her recognition as a young scientist and confirmed her interests in moving from modeling deforestation to doing something about it—which she spent the rest of her life working on. By 1988, she earned her PhD in Soil Science at North Carolina State University, then served as faculty there and at Colorado State University. During this period, she was the first scientist to determine the quality of organic inputs quantitatively as she focused on the potential of using tropical legumes in agroforestry.

Cheryl directed science programs for the Tropical Soil Biology and Fertility Program in Nairobi, Kenya from 1991-2001. She led ambitious and impactful work to reduce emissions from land

use change and promoted agricultural sustainability, resulting in her renowned book “Slash-and-Burn Agriculture: The Search for Alternatives.'' Cheryl had a deep commitment to capacity building, mentoring, and promoting many young people in science and extension, many of whom rapidly rose to some of the highest levels of government and NGOs. Her experiences in the humid tropics of East and Southern Africa, Brazil, Indonesia, Peru—and beyond—made her a leader in the emerging, interdisciplinary field of sustainability science, as she grappled with the tradeoffs and synergies between production, economics, biodiversity and land use in different ecosystems.

Her pioneering work in conservation agriculture and sustainability led to a lifetime of science in the service of society. Cheryl was elected Fellow of the American Society of Agronomy (2005) and of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science (2022). With over 27,00 citations, many of her works are the top cited. Cheryl was a prominent contributor to international science efforts, including serving as Chair of the International Nitrogen Initiative (2008-2013) and a Coordinator for a Millenium Ecosystems Assessment working group (2002-2005). Cheryl joined the Earth Institute at Columbia University (2003) as a Senior Research Scientist and Director of the Agricultural and Food Security Center. She directed science for the Millennium Villages Project and numerous research efforts funded by the Gates Foundation, NSF, USAID, and others. She was a Co-Director and Lead Scientist for Vital Signs Africa (2010-2016). Cheryl finished her career at the University of Florida (2016-2023).

She trained 18 graduate students and 19 postdocs and countless more through committees, employment, and informal mentorship. Cheryl excelled at convening thought leaders for interdisciplinary collaboration, promoting scientists to have voice in policy matters, and never forgetting the realities of real life or ecological boundaries when striving to feed the world.

To those who worked with Cheryl, her prowess for science was surpassed by her friendly, insightful, and giving nature. Cheryl opened doors for many and always extended a hand to help. Her mentorship affected people deeply, often providing profound lessons on mutual respect and collaboration or changing someone’s life course through new opportunities or belief in themselves. Her impact on women in STEM is particularly notable. Cheryl has a wide following of loyal friends, employees, and students who would do just about anything for her.