

Obituary: Dr Ian ('Sarge') Sargeant

(11/01/1935 -05/09/2017)

It is with sadness we note the passing of Dr Ian Sargeant, one of Victoria's most influential and inspirational soil scientists. Ian will be fondly remembered for his passion and enthusiasm for soils and desire to achieve better land management and planning outcomes. His career spanned close to 60 years and involved significant contributions to the education, government and private sectors in the areas of soil science, environmental science, agriculture and natural resource management. He inspired many students about soils and natural resource management and they now form an enviable professional network.



Ian James Sargeant, or "Sarge" as he was affectionally known, was born in the Bendigo area on January 11, 1935. His parents, Horace and Irene owned a multipurpose farm at Huntly.

Although being isolated, farm life suited the young Ian who indulged his love of bike riding and rabbiting by spending many hours investigating the Bendigo area. These early experiences were seminal in developing Ian's ability to "read the landscape", a talent that was crucially important later in his career.

In 1953 Ian received a Victorian Education Department Studentship to attend the University of Melbourne, from where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science in 1956 and a Diploma of Education in 1957. From 1957 to 1959 Ian completed his bond, first at Kerang and then in Bendigo. It was in 1959 at Bendigo High School that Ian met Roslyn. They were married the following year which began a lifelong partnership.

These early experiences teaching secondary students were no doubt important in developing Ian's superior communication skills that he would put to great use as his career developed.

From 1960 to 1974 Ian worked for the Department of Agriculture, first as a Soil Survey Officer and later (1968-1974) as a Soil Research Officer. This began a labour of love that spanned over four decades – characterising and mapping Victorian soils and landscapes. He described tens of thousands of soil profiles and led the mapping of agricultural land in Victorian irrigation districts, East and West Gippsland and the Westernport and Port Phillip catchments. From 1974-1978 Ian worked as the Land Studies Coordinator for the Victorian Ministry for Conservation. Over these two decades, Ian published soil surveys of areas including:

Kulkyne Forest;
Karadoc-Nangiloc-Colignan areas;
Torrumbarry Irrigation Area; and
Westernport Bay Catchment.

In addition, Ian published Papers and Technical Reports on such diverse topics as:

Some Properties of Krasnozems of Southern Victoria, Australia (Aust. J. Soil Res. 8:281, 1970);
and
A Review of the Extent and Environmental Effects of Erosion in the Westernport Bay Catchment (1977).

Ian was one of those rare individuals with an inquisitive mind who could communicate the most complex concepts in a way that ordinary people understood, while all the time holding their interest by drawing on his exceptional knowledge of soil and landscape processes.

In 1973 Ian was awarded a Master's Degree in Science from the University of Melbourne for his thesis "Potassium Uptake and Release in Limed and Unlimed Soils".

From 1978 to 1983 Ian worked as a part-time Lecturer at Swinburne Institute of Technology and as a Lecturer at the Graduate School of Environmental Studies, Monash University. Ed Adamson was a Masters student from Monash whose fieldwork Ian helped supervise in Papua New Guinea in 1982. Ed notes: "Ian was an extra-ordinary and brilliant bloke who had talents in the lab and in the field, which we discovered when he came to PNG to support us in our candidacy and teamwork."

During that period Ian undertook studies that would lead to his being awarded a Doctor of Philosophy from La Trobe University for his thesis "Cation Uptake by Pasture Species with Particular Reference to the Role of Sodium" (1984).

Demonstrating his versatility, in 1983 and 1984 Ian worked as a Research Officer with the Victorian Soil Conservation Authority and later as Senior Soil and Plant Advisory Officer for the Victorian Department of Agriculture. In 1984 he was appointed a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Heritage and Resource Management at Victoria College, now Deakin University. In that period, he established the Environmental Management and Land Use Policy course, one of the earliest of this type in Victoria. A former student, Paul Galloway, recalls fond memories of Ian's lectures and field trips to places like South Gippsland and Koo-Wee-Rup Swamp – "they were legendary, as was Sarge – he was inspirational".

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In 1990 Ian branched out as an independent Environmental Consultant. He consulted on a diverse range of issues including reclamation of contaminated land and mine rehabilitation; wastewater management on land; soil and plant chemistry; environmental chemistry; horticulture protection zone soil assessments; erosion assessment and land capability and local government planning. In that time, he prepared over 50 consultancy reports while maintaining his passion for education through occasional lectures at the University of Melbourne and part-time lecturer appointments at Charles Sturt University, Monash University and La Trobe University and Holmesglen TAFE. In 2010 Ian retired from full-time consulting but remained actively involved in Soil Science up until very recently.

Throughout his career Ian was actively involved in professional associations, regularly helping organise and present field days and excursions. He was President of the Victorian Branch of Soil Science Australia from 1975-1976 and contributed to the establishment of the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand. In 1996 Ian was awarded Honorary Life Membership of Soil Science Australia.

Ian was a humble man whose work will be an enduring legacy of his professionalism, warm spirit and pursuit of scientific excellence. Only recently he mentioned that his love was in soils and that he felt privileged to have built a career around this. Ian was a colleague, a friend and a mentor who will be sadly missed. He leaves an enduring legacy of more than 80 major reports and a vast amount of shared knowledge. Our thoughts are with Ros and Ian's three children and seven grandchildren.

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