

Obituary: Dr Christy Fellows 17 October 1973 – 10 December 2008

Queensland's water research community last month mourned the death of promising young water scientist Dr Christy Fellows.

Dr Fellows passed away in hospital aged 35 as a result of a short illness.

Based at Griffith University's Australian Rivers Institute, Dr Fellows was one of Queensland's leading researchers investigating the impact of human land use and development on river and catchment plants and animals.

She was a deputy project leader in the CRC for Catchment Hydrology investigating the contribution of nitrogen run-off from agriculture and other human land use to problems such as blue-green algae blooms downstream in rivers and catchments.

She worked with Queensland Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy to contribute the science behind new modelling tools to predict nitrogen run-off and new guidelines for managing riparian land to improve water quality.

Christy was a project leader in its successor, the eWater CRC a joint commercial government and non-government program developing innovative online resource management tools.

She led eWater's in-stream processes project which compared seasonal nutrient cycling patterns in three very different river systems, Queensland's Logan River, NSW's Gwydir River and Victoria's Ovens River.

With Australian Rivers Institute colleagues she was about to embark on one of the largest river rehabilitation experiments ever attempted in the state, a Healthy Waterways Partnership project to test and evaluate three different management techniques in three different river systems.

Dr Fellows passed away in the same week she was to see Sarra Hinshaw, her first PhD student, graduate. Her place in the ceremony was taken by her husband, and fellow Australian Rivers Institute researcher, Dr Wade Hadwen.

Originally from the US, Dr Fellows graduated summa cum laude from the University of Maryland with degrees in biology and geology before beginning her PhD at University of New Mexico.

Supervisor Professor Cliff Dahm said he "knew immediately Christy was someone special", equally gifted in teaching and research.

"She travelled 3600 km from her home to do graduate studies in a new environment, and was immediately an innovator and leader," he said.

"When there was need for someone to teach anatomy and physiology, she volunteered. When the opportunity arose to teach natural sciences to non-science majors, she eagerly accepted the challenge and became not just a good teacher but an outstanding teacher."

Unafraid to break new ground in curriculum design, she developed multi-disciplinary degrees and electives well ahead of their time.

While still a graduate student at University of New Mexico she developed and taught a new course Geomicrobiology designed to bridge gaps between earth and life sciences.

In 2000, lured by the promise of a new research centre on the other side of the world, Christy turned down post-doctoral offers from the US Geological Survey and a variety of US universities and joined the Australian Rivers Institute.

Institute Director and National Water Commissioner Professor Stuart Bunn recruited the PhD graduate, who "immediately exceeded all of our expectations."

"She initiated a new program of research on riparian zones, attracted significant external funding and forged new collaborations with government agency scientists. I learned a lot from her about nutrient cycling and ecosystem metabolism."

"She also began to nurture a new generation of researchers as a supervisor of a devoted team of postgraduate students."

Taking on a deputy head of school role at Griffith School of Environment she developed Australia's first Bachelor of Science in Water Resources designed to produce graduates equally qualified in water science, resource management and policy.

The course immediately attracted strong industry backing and scholarship offers as water authorities struggled to fill the shortage of qualified water professionals.

Constantly seeking innovative teaching methods, Dr Fellows took part in *The Earlier the Better* project identifying and putting in place early intervention strategies for first-year students at risk.

She urged students of all ages to take an active role in addressing Australia's water crisis, leading field ecology summer camps enabling students to get hands-on research experience.

Her outreach work extended to local high schools where she actively involved young students in her research into Brisbane's urban river systems.

Griffith Vice Chancellor Professor Ian O'Connor said Dr Fellows' infectious enthusiasm for the environment was an inspiration to the many Griffith students she had mentored.

"Christy's dedication, vision, talents as a scientist and of course her sparkling personality are a great loss to Griffith University and to Australia's water research community."

She is survived by her husband and fellow Australian Rivers Institute researcher Dr Wade Hadwen and their son Eli.