



# Meet the Scientist!



<http://www.naturalinquirer.org>



Soil scientists study how soils influence the cycling of water, nutrients, carbon, pollutants, and other materials. We also study similarities and differences among different soil types.

## Dr. Randy Kolka Research Soil Scientist

Ph.D., University of Minnesota  
USDA Forest Service scientist

### Important Scientist Characteristics

To be a good scientist you need to have creativity and solid critical thinking skills. You also need skills related to statistical analysis, experimental design, and understanding the limitations of your research. Excellent organizational skills are also critical.

### Example of a simple research question I have tried to answer:

How can we reduce soil erosion and nutrient loss? Erosion and nutrient loss can create dead zones in oceans. The dead zones have only a small amount of oxygen left for living things to use. In our research studies, we use strips of native prairie plants in corn and soybean fields to slow erosion and nutrient losses.

### Technology or equipment used in research:

Our climate change research, with the Spruce and Peatlands Under Climatic and Environmental Change (SPRUCE) experiment, monitors artificial heating of soil and air and elevated carbon dioxide. This experiment helps us assess the impacts of climate change on wetlands.

### Most Exciting Discovery

A graduate student and I analyzed data on mercury pollution during forest fires and where this pollution was deposited. After a number of attempts, we were able to understand that the amount of time which has passed after a fire is an important variable for determining the amount of mercury that was deposited.

### When did you know you wanted to be a scientist?

At the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, all natural resource students are required to take a six-week summer camp between their sophomore and junior years. It was during the soils section of camp, where we practiced the discipline in the field, that I discovered a passion for soil science.

<http://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/people/Kolka>