

Studies of succession

Growing up, Virginia was more interested in exploring the woods and playing sports than school. She dropped out of college to be a ski bum. On returning to university life, she discovered the engagement of learning about ecological interactions while taking a required class that mentioned the words “mathematical ecology.” That field has since become her area of focus and was the title of the independent program under which she obtained her PhD at the University of Washington.

Virginia was in the right place at the right time to initiate studies of ecological recovery and reestablishment after the massive eruption of Mount St. Helens in 1980. Being on the first team of ecologists to enter the Mount St. Helens devastation zone after the eruption sealed her interest in disturbance ecology.

Since then she has documented patterns and processes of succession there as well as conducting research on sustainable forestry and agriculture in Brazil, Panama, Mexico, Guatemala, and the US. These efforts have contributed to her team establishing means to quantify progress toward sustainability. Most of her career was in the Environmental Sciences Division at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, where is now a Corporate Fellow Emeritus. In 2018 she transitioned to the University of Tennessee so she could focus on research related to risk and resilience in an uncertain world as well as on STEM education and outreach.

Personal

Virginia has two adult children and two granddaughters as well as three step kids and three step-grandchildren. She recently married Keith Kline, and they live in the energy-efficient house they designed. Virginia and Keith enjoy swimming, hiking, gardening, reading, and spending time with their grandkids.