Mary Elizabeth Kentula

June 7, 1949 - February 5, 2026

Mary E. Kentula died February 5, 2026 in Albany, Oregon, at age 76 after a decline related to a progressive neurological disease. She was preceded in death by her parents, Andrew P. Kentula and Mary E. (Racosky) Kentula; grandparents John and Anna (Bukata) Kentula and Joseph and Anna (Dill) Racosky; her brother, James Kentula; and her husband, Donald J. Armstrong. She is survived by her sister-in-law, Colleen Kentula; cousin Rick “Rico” Racosky; and chosen family Amanda Nahlik and Eric Emerson, whose children, Maxwell (9) and Olivia (7), will always remember her as “Babu.”

Mary was born in 1949 and grew up in a coal-country town in the hills near Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Proud to call herself a “coal miner’s daughter,” she was the first in her family to graduate from college. As a child, she spent countless hours exploring the surrounding hills and forests with her grandfather, who taught her to identify plants and nurtured her lifelong love of the natural world.

She earned a bachelor’s degree in biology from Saint Francis College before moving to Oregon State University, where she completed both a master’s degree in biological science and a doctorate in botany. While at Oregon State she met Donald J. Armstrong, and the two married in 1984. Don was the love of her life. Together they became devoted Oregon State Beavers fans, attending football and basketball games whenever they were played in town.

After Don’s passing, Mary continued the tradition, dressing in Beaver colors and bringing her pom-poms to watch games with close friends.

Wetlands became the focus of her life’s work — from early salt marsh research to national monitoring programs later in her career. For more than three decades with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Corvallis, Oregon, Mary helped define the science behind national wetland policy. Her research demonstrated that creating wetlands did not necessarily replace the ecological functions of those that were lost — a finding that reshaped restoration practice and informed implementation of the Clean Water Act. She later served as scientific and technical lead for the first National Wetland Condition Assessment, the first probability-based survey of wetlands across the United States, producing a foundational approach and dataset that continues to guide environmental decision-making nationwide and influences wetland science across the globe. Among colleagues — especially at EPA — she was affectionately known as the “Queen of the Swamp,” a nickname that reflected both her deep expertise in wetlands and the respect and fondness she inspired in those who knew her.

Mary cared as much about people as she did about the science, and she devoted herself to mentoring the next generation. She taught middle school science early in her career and later mentored more than two dozen undergraduate and graduate students as courtesy faculty at Oregon State University. She maintained friendships with former students for decades, encouraging their work and later welcoming visits from their children. Many scientists in the field trace their path back to her steady support and belief that anyone, regardless of background, could belong in science.

Mary also served the scientific community through leadership in the Society of Wetland Scientists (SWS), including terms as president and treasurer, and contributed internationally to wetland restoration efforts, including advisory

work on the Mesopotamian Marshes in Iraq. She authored or edited influential books and numerous scientific publications, testified before Congress, and was known for her unusual ability to translate complex ecological science into language policymakers and the public could understand. In 2019, Mary was awarded the SWS Lifetime Achievement Award, reflecting a career devoted not only to advancing knowledge but to helping others find their place in it.

Beyond her professional achievements, Mary was a force in the lives of the people around her. She built lasting bonds across generations, keeping in touch, showing up, and making others feel seen. For decades she crocheted baby blankets for the children of friends and, years later, for their grandchildren — quiet, tangible expressions of care that continued long after professional collaborations ended.

Colleagues remember her curiosity, warmth, humor, and openness — a scientist who helped make the field feel like a family, equally at home with data, students, and long conversations. She loved sitting down with friends and colleagues over a cup of tea — sometimes first thing in the morning before emails and the workday began — simple, joyful moments of connection that mattered as much to her as the science itself. She also found peace in walking, often with close friends, through her Maple Ridge neighborhood or in nearby Brandis Park, where conversation and quiet companionship brought her a sense of calm. At home she tended her beautiful yard, including a hillside of vibrant lavender and a spectacular rhododendron in her front yard that slowed passing cars and drew appreciative glances each spring. You couldn’t meet Mary without coming away caring for her and sharing her enthusiasm for the natural world.

In her later years, Mary was supported by a wide community of friends and colleagues, among them a small circle affectionately called “Team Mary” —

Amanda Nahlik, Eric Emerson, Inge King, Carol Boaz, and Mary Powelson — who were by her side almost every day after Don’s death and throughout her declining health, becoming as important to one another as they were to her.

Mary leaves behind not only publications and programs, but people — generations of students, collaborators, and friends who carry forward her curiosity and generosity. Those who knew her will continue to hear her in shared conversations, in careful observations of the natural world, and in the simple habit of slowing down long enough to notice the living world around them.

Memorial contributions may be made to Lumina Hospice and Palliative Care, 720 SW 4th Street, Corvallis, Oregon 97333.