

Mediterranean Botany

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In Memoriam, Ramon Maria Masalles i Saumell

(March 25, 1948, Blancafort, Tarragona – October 9, 2023, Barcelona)

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The past October the 9th died who was professor, colleague and friend of us, Ramon M. Masalles. Writing this obituary evokes sadness, but also inspiration, as it reflects upon the remarkable, positive, and affable nature of Ramon.

Ramon Maria Masalles i Saumell was born on March 25th, 1948 in Blancafort, Tarragona, a small village nestled within the rich tapestry of Mediterranean agricultural landscape. Hailing from a humble peasant family, he spent his childhood immersed in cereal fields and vineyards, in pine forests and Mediterranean scrublands, and in the cultural activities associated with these environments.

Throughout his early education in his hometown and later during his secondary school years in the nearby town of Montblanc, he displayed a strong aptitude for academics, excelling notably in science subjects like chemistry and natural sciences. At the same time, he became involved in local cultural activities, among which the exploration of nature and its dissemination soon stood out.

In 1966, he left his home county to enrol in undergraduate studies in Biological Sciences at the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Barcelona, where he earned his bachelor's degree in 1971. As early as his second year of university, he decided to specialize in Botany, attracted by the teaching of Professor Oriol de Bolòs, a renowned professor of Botany at the faculty.

He pursued his doctoral studies under the supervision of this professor, with a focus on gaining an in-depth understanding of vascular flora and vegetation. During this time, he made a brief visit in 1974 at the Centre d'Études Phytosociologiques et Ecologiques Louis Emberger in Montpellier, France. Here, he developed a keen interest in the analysis of vegetation dynamics in cultural landscapes, influenced by the work of research professors Michel Godron and Gilbert Long. His doctoral thesis followed the aim of exploring botanically lesser-known areas of Catalonia, and was centred on Conca de Barberà, his home county, encompassing extensive agri-

cultural landscapes together with noticeable mountain units at the Gaià Valley and the Prades Mountains. This thesis, with the title “Studies on the Flora and Dynamics of Vegetation in Conca de Barberà,” was successfully defended in December 1979.

His professional career commenced upon earning his bachelor's degree at the Faculty of Biology, University of Barcelona. He began his career as a teaching assistant and associate professor, serving in these roles from 1977 to 1990, when he achieved the position of full Professor. He left the regular teaching activity in 2010, when he became Professor Emeritus, and retired in 2018.

Throughout his nearly forty years of teaching experience, he imparted both theoretical and practical knowledge in various subjects within the field of Botany. His instructional contributions encompassed mainly Botany, Geobotany, Vascular plants, and Population Biology. These courses were offered both in the undergraduate Biology program, but also in the postgraduate programs of Plant Biology, Biodiversity and Organic Farming. From 1998 to 2010, he additionally served as a guest lecturer in the Master's program in Landscape Architecture, imparted at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia. Even after transitioning to his emeritus position, he continued his active involvement in university education. This included teaching courses designed for senior citizens (the so-called University of Experience), and participating in postgraduate mentoring and evaluation committees for formative work.

Throughout his extensive teaching career, he consistently displayed a remarkable ability to connect with his students, humanizing the often-perceived daunting subject of Botany, which most students find unattractive at the very least. Among the various cohorts of students he guided, a shared sentiment of gratitude prevails for a professor who transformed the learning experience into an enjoyable journey. His teaching style was characterized by clarity, supplemented when needed with engaging anecdotes, which greatly facilitated the learning process.

Since 2008, he held full membership of the Royal Academy of Sciences and Arts of Barcelona, and for a long time he had been affiliated with multiple scientific and academic societies, including the Institució Catalana d'Història Natural, the Societat Catalana de Biologia,

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the Sociedad Española de Malherbología, the European Weed Research Society, and the International Association of Vegetation Science.

His scientific research encompassed the field of Geobotany in a broad sense, and he oversaw the successful completion of six doctoral theses. Among these, three explored the dynamics and population biology of agricultural weeds, with the pioneering work of one of his first PhD students, F. Xavier Sans, laying the foundation for the current research group of Agroecology at the University of Barcelona. The remaining theses delved into subjects including the examination of alien flora in Catalonia, plant ecology and succession following agricultural abandonment, as well as floristic and vegetation studies. Furthermore, he devoted part of his activity to the mapping of vegetation and habitats, and to the management of natural heritage.

Among his notable contribution to the field of flora and vegetation knowledge, one standout work is the “Flora Manual dels Països Catalans”, a collaborative effort with Oriol de Bolòs, Josep Vigo, and Josep M. Ninot. This comprehensive manual, first published in 1990 and subsequently updated to a third edition in 2005, serves as a valuable field guide for the eastern part of the Iberian Peninsula and the Balearic Islands. It is still not only a reference work for understanding plant biodiversity but also an essential tool for disseminating this knowledge to non-professionals. He also authored “Flora i vegetació de la Conca de Barberà” in 1983 and various monographs dealing with Pyrenean areas such as the Barravés and Castanesa valleys and the Cadí range, along with studies of the Ebro delta.

In the field of vegetation mapping, from 1983 to 2000 he collaborated on several maps at the 1:50,000 scale, mostly concerning Pyrenean or other mountain areas. Meanwhile, with the adoption in Spain of the Habitats Directive as the foundation for establishing the Natura 2000 Network, he became deeply involved in habitat mapping. He coordinated the mapping efforts of

botanists from Catalonia and Aragon in the “Proyecto de cartografía e inventariación de los tipos de Hábitats de la Directiva 92/43/CEE en España” from 1992 to 1995. Subsequently, from 2000 to 2003, he participated in the Spanish project “Atlas de los hábitats naturales y seminaturales de España”, serving as the coordinator for Catalonia and leading a team of some 20 researchers. He also contributed as a co-author in some volumes of the “Manual dels hàbitats de Catalunya”, commissioned and published by the Department of Medi Ambient i Habitatge of the Generalitat de Catalunya from 2005 to 2018.

Ramon demonstrated a consistent commitment to natural heritage management for most of his professional career. Notable examples include the significant study “El patrimoni natural de la comarca de Barcelona. Medidas necesarias para su protección y conservación. Los recursos renovables terrestres,” conducted in collaboration with J.M. Camarasa and R. Folch, published in 1979, as well as technical reports and vegetation mapping endeavours.

In the realm of scientific dissemination, it is relevant the coordination and authorship of volume 6, “Plantes superiors”, of the “Història Natural dels Països Catalans” (1988). He also co-authored the book chapter “El paisatge vegetal de la Conca de Barberà” in 1987, in collaboration with J.M. Mestres and J. Pujadas. Additionally, he co-authored the book “Guia botànica del jardí Ferran Soldevila de la Universitat de Barcelona” in 2023, alongside with C. Blanché.

Throughout his professional activities outlined, he consistently fostered a warm and respectful atmosphere. In an academic environment, that often creates confrontational situations, he always promoted consensus, maintained reasonable opinions, and showed empathy towards everyone. His impact on those around him has been profound, and the lessons learned from him are immeasurable.