Soil Horizons: Soil Science Society of America member Kate Scow has done a little bit of everything. In her words, she’s “a meandering path. And those who meander should take solace.” Scow grew up in Maryland but lived abroad in Israel and Argentina with her family as a teenager, an experience that seemed to spark her wandering ways. She returned to the U.S. to study biology and ecology before receiving her Ph.D. in soil science from Cornell University. She is now a professor of soil science at the University of California–Davis.

For the past five years, Scow has been working with filmmaker Deborah Koons Garcia on *Symphony of the Soil*, an artistic look into the connections between soil and the world. The UC Davis professor served as the key adviser to the film, supplementing the filmmaker’s artistic vision with the technical aspects of soil science. Here’s what Scow had to say about her role in the movie-making process.

**Soil Horizons:** When did you first know you had an interest in soil science?

**Scow:** I didn’t know that I was interested in it for a long time. When I was a teenager, my family drove across Europe, and I collected a soil sample from each country and brought it home—illegally. That’s when I was 15 or something. Something was afoot.

I started out studying animal behavior, but I worked for a few years doing a lot of risk assessment for the USEPA on contaminants before going back to graduate school. I started to hear about soil and see the importance of it, and it seemed like everything came from soil. Everything goes back to soil. I fell in love.

**Soil Horizons:** And now you’ve helped make a film about soil. What was your role in *Symphony of the Soil*?

**Scow:** I’ve been involved in the film from the very beginning about five years ago. Deborah Koons Garcia, the filmmaker, found me by talking to several people who suggested me for the job. As an adviser, my role has been to point out key references of soil science. I helped explain and simplify some of the really challenging concepts, like the nitrogen cycle and soil biodiversity.

I provided a lot of input in what to include and not to include and did a lot of checking for scientific accuracy. This was in light of Deborah’s need to be able to express herself in more artistic ways. I helped explain and simplify some of the really challenging concepts, like the nitrogen cycle and soil biodiversity.

**Soil Horizons:** Did you work on this on a full-time basis?

**Scow:** It was on and off over the five years it took to make the film. There were times when it was pretty intense and then times where it was more intermittent. It took a while to put together this film, so we kind of went with the flow as it was being made.

**Soil Horizons:** Did you travel much with the crew?

**Scow:** In California, I traveled a bit with them. I went on several shoots. But I was much more comfortable being an adviser than being a “player” in the film. Most of my time was spent at the studio, putting together the story board for the whole film and taking copies of the film home to review them and provide feedback.

**Soil Horizons:** Did the movie end up like you imagined it would?
Images from the movie, *Symphony of the Soil*.

**Scow:** I love film. It’s one of my passions in life. I was part of an advisory committee at Cornell, where I programmed a lot of film festivals and showings. So I’m very keyed into film. I’ve always wanted to be involved in making a film about soil, and I always imagined something along the lines of *Fantastic Voyage*, with Raquel Welch traveling through the human body. I wanted to do a film like that about soil. Going down preferential flow paths, getting chased by nematodes, hiding in small pores. But that’s a completely different kind of idea.

When I met Deborah, I realized she was going to be taking us to a place where we don’t usually go in soil. She already had a strong desire to create this symphony about soil. She’s very musical and Vivian, her editor, is an incredible music editor. Soil is so stubborn about showing its beauty; we just walk all over it. It’s really tough to get at it. But Deborah had this vision, and I watched as she captured all of these different things about soil, these great scientists she had giving insight, all combined with the music. It came out more intense, emotional, and beautiful than I ever imagined. Am I foaming at the mouth yet?

**Soil Horizons:** It must have been great for you to finally get the chance to be part of a film. Did you learn a lot in the process?

**Scow:** I did. I love film, and it was incredible to see the process and be there all along. It was an amazing gift to me, being involved in it all along the way as the key adviser. You go out and capture footage of all these different things, and then you cut it down, and try to glue it all together and then you condense it more and weave it together, and distill it. Weave and distill. Capture the essence. And the whole time, you’re looking at the overall structure of the entire film. It has its own architecture. It was incredible to see the whole process.
Soil Horizons: Now that it’s complete, what do you like most about the film?

Scow: I like that it celebrates the soil with no reservations. I thought Deborah really caught the beauty and huge mystery of soil. And she captured that while still providing a lot of real knowledge.

In talking with people about it, it seems like the film works well for those who have no connection to soil. They see it and go, “Wow, there’s so much here.” And it’s great for people who have a casual relationship with soil, like gardeners. People who may not have the technical expertise, but think about soil all the time. And it even works for the experts who already know a lot about theory and practice. The film really uplifts soil. It brings it to the higher level where it should be.