

Acclaimed Jamestown scientist shares his exceptional knowledge of the planet's oceans

By Dotti Farrington

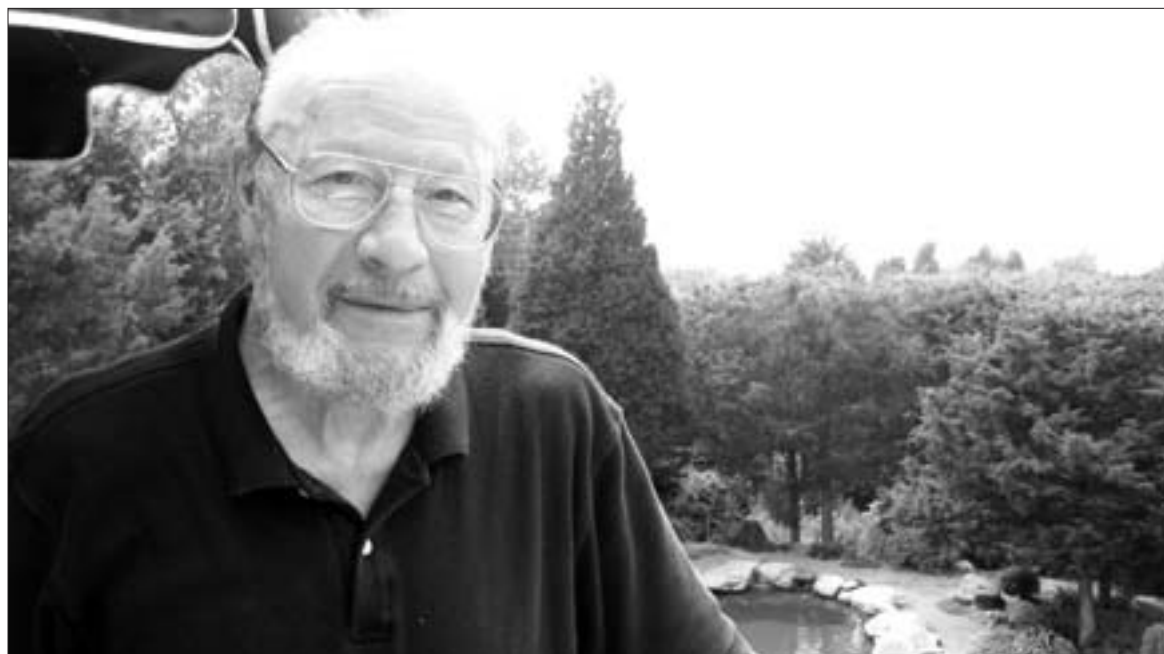
From the oceans of the world to the fate of Conanicut Island, University of Rhode Island professor and Jamestown resident Ted Smayda carries the diversities of the world in his head and his heart.

Smayda is one of several world movers and shakers of oceanography that make URI's Bay Campus their global work base and the island here their personal home. He is a widely decorated scientist whose awards include a lifetime achievement honor as a major contributor to the field of ecology of marine phytoplankton (algae), with focus on both harmful and non-toxic forms.

The scientist, who once thought he might become a poet, has authored more than 140 publications about his research, including texts on ecological effects of climatic variations. He said his ocean studies complement land-based concerns about global warming. "We are working on how to handle the notion of different explanations, including climate. We have great hope that we can mitigate climatic impacts and other factors," he explained.

The professor also talks about philosophical, as well as scientific, approaches. "It is a matter of attitude, a Zen approach that basically there is a spirit and energy in all living things. It is a reverence for different life forms. I've spent a lot of time observing creatures and finding it amazing what goes on. It is stunning that such diversity functions in balance for evolution and development. When we add or change, we destabilize... but species are free to return to balance. Results are not always good for humans," he said.

Smayda, with a wide-ranging embodiment of knowledge, finds himself amazed about what is on the Internet about him and his



Ted Smayda

work when he feels so committed to being anonymous and humble.

Personal matters

Smayda, and his wife Marilyn, came to Jamestown about 20 years ago, for a kind of a hide-away close to their work. He came to URI in the 1960s and lived near the campus, but they were long attracted to the island and took the opportunity when it came to move here. He designed their Juniper Ridge home to take advantage of the bay view.

His wife studied ballet with many notables in that field, performed with URI's Modern Dance Company, graced the stages of Europe with the American Festival Ballet and is now owner and artistic director of The Studio at Mariner Square in Narragansett for all forms of theater and dance arts.

Smayda attributes his life work to his favorite uncle who took him fishing, at age six, at a pond in a coal mining district in his native Pennsylvania. The first time they fished, the boy knew he wanted to be an aquatic biologist, even if he

did not yet have a vocabulary that included those words.

His uncle and aunt often took him to fish and told him about creatures in or around water. Those outings bolstered their nephew's career dreams, occasionally tempered by possibilities of being a pediatrician or a writer.

Then Smayda's parents moved to the New Haven shores area of Connecticut, and it was easy for him to transfer love of the beauty of fresh water creatures to the greater expanses of the salt water world. His love evolved to an attitude "if I couldn't catch them, I would try to understand them and their environment." He expected to become a marine zoologist, until he saw algae under a microscope for the first time and was hooked by the extraordinary beauty of the microorganisms he saw.

His children caught his love for the sea world. He and his wife are the parents of a daughter, Susan, an environmental engineer in Portland, Ore. and a son, Thomas,

an aquatic biologist specializing in salmon streams and hydrology in Seattle. Susan runs a business with her husband and they oversaw the clean-up logistics of the 1989 oil spill in Alaska, the largest oil spill in North American history.

Their son was born in Norway, while there for Smayda's graduate studies as a Fulbright Scholar, the prestigious awards program to promote global understanding. It almost led him to adopt Norway as his own country because of its lifestyle and its being the mecca of his professional specialty. Ultimately, his homeland won his loyalty and Norway continues with a strong lineage via the births of both his son and granddaughter there. Smayda continues to be mellow about longings to claim both countries as his own.

Career matters

The oceanographer considers his greatest achievement as being "on the cutting edge of the world platform in my field. I'm a vehicle for a lot of important discover-

ies leading to the understanding of oceans and of our planet, in a modest way. Basically I am selfish. It is not a job, but an outlet for curiosity."

He said, "I am glad I am where I am. At key points, I've had mentors, such as my uncle and professors, who turned me on to new insights and nurtured that lifelong interest. I was blessed with superb students who went on to active, involved, contributing lives as scientists. I learned so much from them. I've been very lucky."

The professor sees classroom situations as "balances of give and take of perceptions of truths, where students doubt and challenge and professors reevaluate to confirm or adapt to learn something new."

Still to be done

He and his wife worry about Conanicut Island exceeding its carrying capacity via overdevelopment. He said, "The bit of nature that attracts us all is disappearing through self interests accommodated at the expense of the ecological and environmental future of the island." If he had his way, the town would vest power in an ecological officer to balance goals of leaders who push for economic development.

For all his successes, Smayda has a few regrets, not being able to: choose both his Norway education and post doctoral study with a particular Yale professor; convince powers that be to continue a three decades study in Narragansett Bay; and make time to work with the HABs in his own manmade pond, green with algae, and not the kind of green that causes envy among beholders.

Not that any of these items are without chance of reversals. "More than anything, it is my own pond that keeps me humble."

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Do not forget underinsurance coverage is extremely important and should never be rejected or reduced.

In a recent RI Supreme Court decision the judge indicated that the estate of a man that died in an automobile accident could not collect from any underinsurance on the rental car he was driving because the rental company had rejected the underinsurance coverage (not the man that was killed in the accident).

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