

Edward L. Towle; Islands Advocate

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Edward L. Towle, 77, who was internationally recognized for his efforts to conserve and restore the environments of small islands, particularly in the Caribbean, died Sept. 12 at his home in Washington of injuries received in an elevator accident Aug. 28 at a Dupont Circle dialysis center.

A longtime Caribbean conservationist, Dr. Towle was the president of Island Resources Foundation in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, from 1972 to 1998. He started the Foundation with his wife in 1972 and remained active as a senior environmental planner and chairman of the Board of Trustees after his retirement.

Over the past 25 years, Dr. Towle contributed significantly to both global and Caribbean-wide initiatives for the protection of small islands. He frequently appeared as a small-islands advocate in international forums and provided services to international institutions, including the World Conservation Union, the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations Environment Program, the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

He was the author of more than 60 major publications, primarily on small-island development and environmental planning. With John McEachern, he wrote "Ecological Guidelines for Island Development" in 1974. It was one of the first publications to use the word "ecological" in its title, said Bruce Potter, president of the Island Resources Foundation.

Dr. Towle guided his life's work with "high-level policy on one hand and good, strong science" on the other, Potter said. Early on, Dr. Towle challenged others to recognize islands as whole systems, with their own tight linkages and unique sociology.

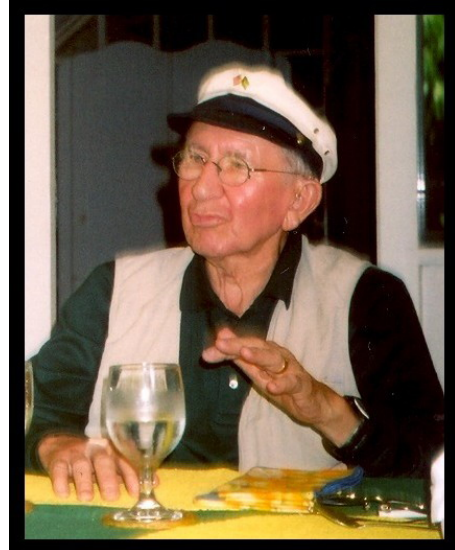
"Islands were being misunderstood, because people weren't studying their eco-systems," he told a British Virgin Islands tourist guide in 2001. "The failure to understand the differences between insular and continental systems has unanticipated and too often undesirable consequences for islanders."

Dr. Towle was born in Melrose, Mass., and graduated from Tufts University in 1952. He spent two years in the Navy in the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Caribbean and taught for three years at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. In 1960, he received a PhD in the history of science from the University of Rochester and then served as assistant director of the university's Canadian studies program.

In 1964, Dr. Towle accepted a teaching post at the University of Wisconsin's Milwaukee campus, where he became the first director of the university's Center for Great Lakes Studies.

He moved to Washington in 1966 to join the Smithsonian Institution's naval history program. In 1967, while on assignment for the Smithsonian in the Caribbean, he was recruited to serve as the second director of the Caribbean Research Institute at the College of the Virgin Islands in St. Thomas.

In the early 1970s, Dr. Towle's vision for an independent, science-based organization to focus exclusively on protecting and enhancing the environments of small tropical islands took shape. Since then, the Island Resources Foundation has been a leader in Caribbean resource conservation, environmental planning and institution building.



Edward L. Towle focused much of his conservation work on Caribbean Islands

Despite the praise he received throughout the years for the many tangible projects with which he was associated, Dr. Towle was always proudest of the intangible products of his work as head of Island Resources Foundation: the accomplishments of the "alumni" of the Foundation's many intern and research associate appointments and the many Caribbean environmental advocacy organizations that were directly and indirectly assisted through programs that Towle designed with great care and attention to local needs, resources, and sensitivities. Even in the last week of his life, he was planning wildlife advocacy projects in support of conservation groups throughout the Caribbean region.

In 1980, Dr. Towle established a part-time residence in the Dupont Circle neighborhood, near a branch office of the Island Resources Foundation that became his permanent home after retirement in 1998.

Dr. Towle was recognized in 1988 as one of the United Nations Environment Program's "Global 500" honorees.

At the time of his death, he was planning for the preservation and management of Sandy Cay, a habitat for plants, reptiles, birds and insects in the British Virgin Islands.

Survivors include his wife, Judith Ann Towle of Washington; five children, Amy Swiezynski, Sarah Spoerl, Peter Towle and Geoffrey Towle, all of Exeter, N.H., and Jazz Towle of Portland, Maine; and six grandchildren. A memorial service will be arranged later in Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, where Dr. Towle established a new office of the Foundation in 1998. Mrs. Towle asks that in lieu of flowers friends consider a donation to the Island Resources Foundation.

