

# Death of state geologist rocks the community

By Stephen Greenwell Jr. Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, October 22, 2015 2:30 pm

According to colleagues and friends, the state geologist, University of Rhode Island Professor Emeritus Jon Boothroyd had a special gift for processing the hard technical data of his field and presenting it in a form the average person could understand.

In the wake of his death Oct. 15 at his home on Middlebridge Road in South Kingstown, members of these groups are at a loss for anyone who could replace the unique combination of expertise, accessibility and outreach that Boothroyd, 77, possessed.

“There are others of us here who are heavily focused on the research, but he was kind of down in the trenches with the towns and the [state] Coastal Resources Management Council on these issues, and I don’t see anyone who can easily fulfill that role,” said John King, professor of oceanography at the URI Graduate School of Oceanography. “In academia, you try to get your work done, so the idea of going to more meetings usually doesn’t have much appeal. But Jon was willing to do that and to be the liaison between academia and the general public.”

Julie Sharpe, a member of the Narrow River Land Trust, said she first met Boothroyd when she served on the Narragansett Conservation Commission. He was instrumental in developing ordinances that protected waterways by requiring regular pumping of septic systems in town, she said, and also served as a consultant and board member at various times for the Narrow River Preservation Association.

“He would look very holistically at issues and he would listen,” Sharpe said. “He often would be the last person to speak, and he would always bring in the science and the scientific facts, and he would leave you convinced whether a particular situation was a problem or wasn’t a problem.”

Grover Fugate, executive director of the state Coastal Resources Management Council, said Boothroyd’s impact on their operations was nearly impossible to calculate.



## John Boothroyd

State Geologist Jon Boothroyd, at left, leads a class of University of Rhode Island students on a field trip to the Narrow River in 2005. Boothroyd, who died Oct. 15, was known for his love of field work and his ability to make scientific information accessible to the general public.

“We’ve relied on Jon for very close to 30 years, so Jon had a very profound impact on our coastal program and how we dealt with things. He’s left his mark all over,” Fugate said. “He was constantly imparting his knowledge and he was always an educator. He was always willing to talk to any audience and that was a hard skill to replicate.”

Bryan Oakley, a former graduate student of Boothroyd’s, is now an assistant professor of environmental geoscience in the Department of Environmental Earth Science at Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic, Connecticut. He described Boothroyd as a man devoted to civic causes and public outreach.

“Jon was the consummate field geologist, who clearly loved Narragansett,” Oakley wrote in an email. “His passion for the Narrow River, Canonchet Farm and recent involvement in the Narragansett Beach Sustainability Committee and Gansett Days, clearly speaks to that. While he was a colleague, friend and mentor to many in the scientific community, his influence extended well beyond his discipline. His passage leaves a hole in the local community.”

Boothroyd was born in Littleton, New Hampshire, and earned a bachelor’s degree in economics from the University of New Hampshire-Durham, a master’s degree in geology from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and a doctorate in geology from the University of South Carolina-Columbia. He moved to Rhode Island in the mid-1970s when he was hired by the University of Rhode Island as an assistant professor of geology, specializing in coastal and environmental geology. He spent his entire career there, and on Oct. 16, was scheduled to be inducted into the College of the Environment and Life Sciences Hall of Fame.

King said Boothroyd had a way of explaining the coastal erosion issues facing Rhode Island that inspired action from stakeholders without causing panic.

“The realization is coming to them that they’re in deep trouble, and they are. The whole global sea level rise change is going to have a profound impact,” King said. “Jon was really very good about holding their hand through that entire process, and explaining to them that ‘yes, this is real, and yes, this is going to happen,’ and that there are things you can do about it instead of just throwing your hands up.”

Without Boothroyd providing outreach in that field, King wasn’t sure how the void would be filled. Nobody could match Boothroyd’s institutional memory of current and past regulations, he said.

“I cover some of that expertise, and I do that sort of interaction with the general public, but Jon had this body of knowledge that was really practical,” he said. “He was able to translate the science in FEMA flood zones and to explain to people where they stood, and he didn’t run from it screaming, which would be my general response.”

Fugate said it was Boothroyd’s ability to float between the academic world and the general public

that made him invaluable.

“Jon didn’t get caught up in the jargon,” Fugate said. “He didn’t try to impress people with that. He could speak it as well as anybody else, but he tried to talk in ways that they could understand. He could walk into a room of everyday people and start explaining these processes, or he could walk into a geological conference and talk to them as well. He could talk to the gamut of individuals.”

Sharpe said nobody knew the Narrow River watershed better than Boothroyd, and he wrote the geology chapter in the group’s handbook. Even after long regulatory meetings, Sharpe said Boothroyd would head to Twin Willows with her for a few beverages and more talk about environmental issues.

“I just look around the community and think, who’s going to take his place?” she said. “He always, always, always gives you a straight answer, all the time, particularly with all of the coastal conservation we’re trying to do now.”

Fugate said CRMC staff spoke with Boothroyd two to three times a week. Fugate also took several of Boothroyd’s classes at URI, and several of Boothroyd’s doctoral students worked on CRMC projects.

“He’s left his mark throughout the program in both the people he trained and placed with us, and the direct contact he had with us,” Fugate said. “Fortunately for us, we have some of his students to rely on, but he’s going to be someone who’s very, very difficult to replace.”

King first met Boothroyd 31 years ago, with Boothroyd the established professor when King moved from Minnesota to work at URI.

“He was not only the expert on the East Coast, but the expert on glacial geology,” King said. “We had some commonality in backgrounds. We were like the two people who knew about glacial geology on the faculty at the time. He was a real field-oriented guy. He could walk anywhere in the state of Rhode Island and tell you about what had happened where you were standing.”

Sharpe concurred with this description, and said she particularly enjoyed the guided tours and history lessons Boothroyd gave.

“He loved teaching, he really did,” she said. “He loved explaining the history of the land, so that [people] could better understand how the shoreline worked and how it came to be how it is, but more importantly, what are the dynamic forces that are changing the land.”

King said Boothroyd was such a strong believer in field work that he invested time others were unwilling to spend. Boothroyd took his students on seven to 10-day trips to the Outer Banks of North Carolina and other geologically unique areas.

“He would spend as much time as he needed to in front of the computer screen, but he’d much rather

be on a field trip,” King said. “Nobody does those kind of trips these days.”

King said the public outreach and accessibility stemmed from Boothroyd’s love of teaching.

“He set a pretty high bar for teaching that I don’t think is going to be easy to equal. He played a vital role in environmental management for Rhode Island,” King said. “All the coastal towns that are having major problems now, he was interacting with all of them as the state geologist, and he was doing the same thing with CRMC, and that’s going to be pretty irreplaceable. He probably forgot more about things coastal and things glacial in Rhode Island than most people know. He’s trained some good students, but he was an iconoclast. There was only one of him.”

[narragansett@scindependent.com](mailto:narragansett@scindependent.com)