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Peter Douglas, Sentry of California's Coast, Dies at 69

By DENNIS HEVESI

Peter Douglas, who fought for decades to preserve the California coast — treasured for its vast stretches of pristine beaches, jagged cliffs and delicate wetlands — died on April 1 at his sister's home in La Quinta, Calif. He was 69.

The cause was lung cancer, his son Vanja said.

For 26 years, Mr. Douglas was the executive director of the [California Coastal Commission](#), the powerful state agency that he helped create with a mandate to keep the coast open to the public — and one that set a high standard for its counterparts in other states.

He brought a profound passion for the sea to the task.

Mr. Douglas was a boy when he, his mother and sister boarded a ship to cross the English Channel while emigrating from Germany after [World War II](#), eventually coming to the United States. The roiling currents and tides entranced him, he once said, creating “an intangible, unbreakable, lifelong bond.”

It became [his mission](#) to ensure that all Californians could swim, surf, fish or just see the sea along the 1.5 million acres of the state's 1,100 miles of coastline — to the consternation of many commercial interests and property owners.

Mr. Douglas was the executive director of the commission from 1985 until November, when he stepped down because of his declining health.

Bearded and usually wearing Birkenstock sandals, a bolo tie and hiking pants, he was known to sometimes pull his [biodiesel](#) car to the side of a highway and stand in front of bulldozers operating without a permit.

“Few, if any, conservation leaders have had a greater impact on protecting California's stunning coastal resources, and all Americans owe him a great debt of gratitude,” Kerry O'Toole, president of the American Land Conservancy, said when Mr. Douglas retired.

Mr. Douglas was a young lawyer working for a state assemblyman in the early 1970s when he was assigned to draft legislation to protect the coastline. In that capacity, he was the principal writer of [Proposition 20](#), the 1972 referendum that established the commission.

He helped write the Coastal Act of 1976, which gave the commission permanent status as a quasi-judicial agency with jurisdiction that often surpasses that of city officials and the state authorities. The commission's mandate includes limiting coastal construction, ensuring public access to beaches and advocating for regulation of [offshore drilling](#).

During Mr. Douglas's tenure, the agency helped create thousands of acres of parklands and public trails. The agency also secured more than 1,300 easements for paths to the shore through private property, and its efforts led to the preservation of much of Highway 1 as a two-lane road weaving through farmland, cliffs and dunes.

In one of its most prominent decisions, the commission denied a 1998 plan by heirs to William Randolph Hearst, the famed newspaper publisher, to build a 650-room resort and golf course on the vast Hearst estate near the shore in San Simeon. It would have obstructed views and public access and intruded on sensitive wildlife habitats, the commission concluded.

Mr. Douglas provoked considerable opposition, particularly from the [Pacific Legal Foundation](#), which has sued the commission in dozens of cases. Paul Beard, head of the foundation's legal team, said: "Under Douglas's leadership, the commission became the rogue agency that it is, running roughshod over people's rights, destroying economic opportunity and, ironically, making it unaffordable for all but the wealthiest to buy land in California's coastal zone."

But for Annie Notthoff, the California advocacy director for the Natural Resources Defense Council, a national organization, he was a groundbreaker.

"California set the standard for protecting the coast, and that has expanded to almost every other coastal state in the country," she said. "So if you look out to sea anywhere in the country, California and Peter Douglas have had a major impact."

Not enough of an impact, according to Mr. Douglas. "The coast," he told The Los Angeles Times in 2001, "is never saved. It's always being saved."

Born Peter Michael Ehlers in Berlin on Aug. 22, 1942, (he and his sister changed their last name upon becoming American citizens), Mr. Douglas and his mother, Maria, and sister, Christiane, joined relatives in Los Angeles after arriving in the United States in 1950.

Besides his son and his sister, Mr. Douglas (who lived in Larkspur, Calif., and had a home by a

river near the Oregon border) is survived by another son, Sascha; and two grandchildren. His marriage to the former Rotraut Schmidt ended in divorce.

He was “the world’s best bureaucratic street fighter,” Steve Blank, a member of the commission, told The New York Times in 2010.

“Once he’s gone, this commission will implode in the blink of an eye,” Mr. Blank said, “and all we’ll be talking about is the color of the concrete used to pave over what’s left of the coast.”