

Noted UNLV biologist James Deacon has died

By HENRY BREAN LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

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James Deacon was a biologist, environmentalist and staunch defender of desert fish who launched UNLV's environmental studies program and helped spawn new generations of scientists in both the classroom and his own family.

The distinguished professor emeritus died Monday at his home in Henderson. He was 80.

Deacon arrived at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 1960 after receiving his doctorate from the University of Kansas. A year later he took his first scuba dive in Devil's Hole, a water-filled cavern 90 miles west of Las Vegas that is home to an endangered pupfish found nowhere else on Earth.

He was drawn to such isolated desert fish "because they're so improbable," said Mary Dale Deacon, his wife of 30 years.

In the 1970s, he testified in defense of the Devil's Hole pupfish during a legal fight over groundwater pumping that landed in the U.S. Supreme Court and resulted in a landmark decision favoring endangered species protection.

The native of White, S.D., went on to play a major role in securing vital water rights for Death Valley and Zion National Parks, and he aided in the establishment of Ash Meadows and Moapa National Wildlife Refuges, two federal preserves in Southern Nevada framed around some of the isolated spring fish species he helped describe to the world.

Two local species are named for him: the Spring Mountains springsnail (*Pyrgulopsis deacon*) and Las Vegas dace (*Rhinichthys deacon*), now extinct.

Deacon's work set him at odds with the Southern Nevada Water Authority and its plans to siphon groundwater across a wide swath of eastern Nevada. In interviews, papers and protest letters, he warned that the authority's multi-billion-dollar gambit could drain a vast groundwater network stretching into as many as 80 basins in Nevada, Utah and California, far beyond the network of monitoring wells the agency plans.

He feared the project even poses a threat to his beloved Devil's Hole, where his wife said he dove to count pupfish dozens of times — "maybe even hundreds" — until 1988, when a tumor on his spine put him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Dale first met Deacon in 1982, when she was about to be hired as UNLV's director of libraries and he interrupted her job interview to get a grant application signed.

She said one of the first things he did after their 1984 marriage was see to it that she received her scuba certification. Then he took her on her first dive — in Devil's Hole, of course.

During his 42-year career at UNLV, Deacon taught a wide range of graduate and undergraduate classes and was instrumental in establishing the university's master's and doctorate programs in biology. He was chair of both the Department of Biological Sciences and the Department of Environmental Studies, which he helped establish, and he published more than 90 peer-reviewed articles and chapters.

He also helped inspire scientists outside the lecture hall.

His daughter, Cindy Deacon Williams, is a biologist who married a biologist and has two sons who are biologists. Her

son, Josh Williams, co-authored his first published paper with his grandfather, and all four of the biologists in the Williams family shared writing credits on another of Deacon's scientific articles.

"It's a dynasty is what it is," Mary Dale said.

For Cindy Deacon Williams, it began with childhood trips to remote spring-fed pools across the Mojave Desert and the Great Basin.

"It was just a lot of fun to play in the water with my dad," she said. "You couldn't grow up around my dad without being infected by his love of the natural world."

In recent years, Deacon expressed pessimism about prospects for the most famous and imperiled of his research subjects, the Devil's Hole pupfish. But he was encouraged by the fight to save the species — or at least allow it to fade away naturally and not be wiped out by human activity. He considered the effort nothing less than "an expression of our humanity."

"What makes humans unique is our ability to know. The more species that go extinct out there, the less there is to know," Deacon told the Review-Journal in 2013. "The more we learn about the Devil's Hole pupfish, the more human we become."

Deacon is survived by his wife, Mary Dale; his daughter, Cindy, and son-in-law, Jack Williams; grandsons, Austin and Josh Williams; great-grandchildren, Mason and Morgan Williams; former wife, Maxine Cost; brother, Dick Deacon; and sisters, Marilyn Pimperton, Ruth Mitchell, Judy Deacon, and Melinda Deacon. He was preceded in death by his son, David Everett Deacon; sister, Donna Marie Deacon, and parents, James and Mona Deacon.

A memorial celebration of Deacon's life is being planned for the week of May 4 at UNLV.

Donations in his honor may be made to the UNLV Foundation's James E. Deacon Scholarship Endowment or to the Nature Conservancy for conservation efforts in Nevada.

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