



# Ricky Grigg

1937 – 2014

*Aloha to Ricky Grigg: Diver, Surfer, Scientist*

(Right) Ricky in Hawaii 2009.  
(photo by Bret Gilliam)



The ocean world lost one of its greatest leaders on May 21, 2014 when Prof. Richard W. Grigg passed away peacefully at his home in Hawaii with his wife Maria. He was 77.

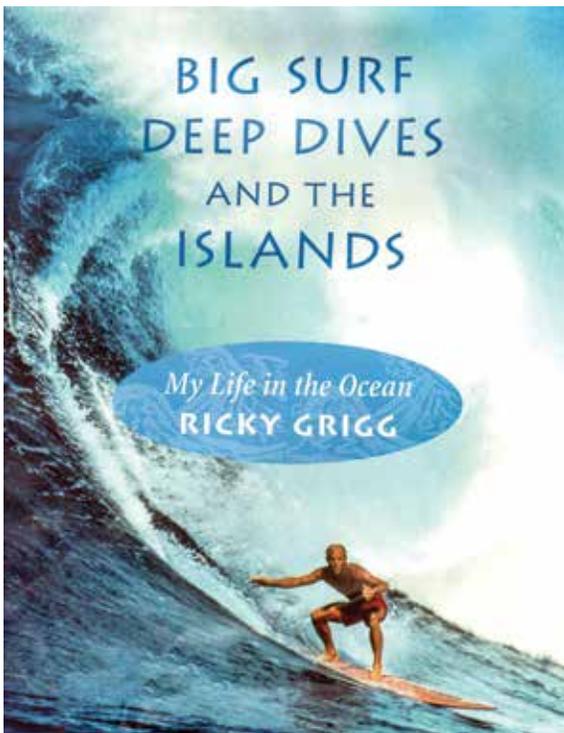
Known to his friends and colleagues as Ricky, he is remembered for his long career as a pioneer in big wave surfing, scuba diving, and scientific underwater research. In 1953 at age 16 he drove up the California coast from Santa Monica to Rincon after an epic January storm to catch the big swell and discovered a life's calling. "This was more than a sport, and the ocean was more than a playground. It was like discovering your destiny," he recalled. His path was set.

I first met Ricky at the U.S. Surfing Championships in 1966. I was a teenager riding for Hobie and he was a standout competitor for Gregg Noll surfboards. There was a 14-year age difference but we bonded over our common interests. A truly larger-than-life figure, his profound personality somehow combined his sheer exuberance for life with an unequalled smile and his deep scientific passion as an oceanographer. Someone once referred to him as a living oxymoron... an "intellectual surfer".

Grigg was born in Los Angeles in 1937 and earned a B.S. in biology at Stanford, a Masters in zoology at the University of Hawaii, and his Ph.D. in oceanography at Scripps. While pursuing his academic career he lived a parallel life as one of the innovators of big wave surfing on Oahu's North Shore including the daunting conditions of winter swells at Waimea Bay and Sunset Beach. He also was a standout competitor in surfboard paddling and won the first Catalina-to-Manhattan Beach contest, a distance of 32 miles, at age 18 in 1955. He won the Duke Kahanamoku Invitational Surfing event in 1967... considered to be the World Championship.

The legendary Duke was impressed with his cool prowess in the 18-ft challenging waves and presented the trophy to him saying: "Ricky, you really understand the ocean."

"At that moment, I felt my strategy of life..."



Ricky surfing a giant wave on Hawaii's North Shore. Cover of his 1998 book, *Big Surf, Deep Dives and the Islands*.



Ricky doing research off Lanai in Hawaii, 2011.  
(photo by Bret Gilliam)

of surfing, diving, and oceanography all come together,” Grigg fondly remembered.

He was part of the saturation dive crew for Sea Lab II off La Jolla with former astronaut Scott Carpenter and that launched his scientific career as a leading research oceanographer. His work studying undersea volcanoes, coral structures, and ocean topography led to a long series of distinguished work that advanced understanding of ocean science and the fragile community of the ecosystem.

Much of his research concentrated on the atolls and submerged islands of the Hawaiian-Emperor chain, an archipelago extending nearly 4,000 nautical miles into the vast Pacific. He discovered the “Darwin Point” that defined a mark of latitude where the growth of coral colonies degrade and the surrounding volcanic islands built upon them begin to “drown.”

In 1971 he was the first diver to film the underwater scene of molten lava as it streamed into the ocean from a volcano. In 2006 the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, a stretch of ocean and tiny atolls whose total area exceeds that of all the U.S. National Parks combined, was established based on the data developed by Ricky and his colleagues. His 2012 book *“Archipelago: The Origin and Discovery of the Hawaiian Islands”* chronicled his years of discovery.

It’s somewhat amusing in retrospect to note that his serious scientific side was also tempered by appearing in more than a dozen light-hearted surf movies such as “Slippery When Wet” and acting as Yvette Mimieux’s surfing coach for a 1964 episode of the television drama “Dr. Kildare.” Grigg was also featured prominently in the classic 2004 movie “Riding Giants” that won widespread critical acclaim and enthusiasm from a mainstream viewing public that was fascinated by the big wave riders that emerged beginning in the 1950s.

In 1999 he was inducted as a Fellow into the Academy of Underwater Arts & Science’s Diving Hall of Fame as the recipient of their NOGI award for Science.

Ricky has moved on to catch the next wave and we all wish him a smooth ride. Aloha. 🌺

—Bret Giliam



Rick Grigg (front row, second from left) with Sea Lab II crew. Scott Carpenter is front row fifth from left.



Ricky (third from left) with Duke Kahanamoku after winning the Surfing World Championship in 1967.