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BAY AREA

# Rob Caughlan, Surfrider Foundation leader and coastal access advocate, dies at 82

By Sam Whiting, Staff Writer

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Rob Caughlan surfs at Linda Mar beach in Pacifica in 1990. The veteran political strategist and influential environmental advocate died Jan. 17 at age 82. Courtesy of Don Montgomery

Surfing environmentalist Rob “Birdlegs” Caughlan’s last major competition was a 2010 “legends” event in Santa Cruz, which Caughlan insisted on calling the “geezers” division.

Caughlan, a San Mateo political consultant who surfed in Pacifica daily, lived by the motto “he who catches the most waves wins.” He proved it that day by winning his heat, after catching one of the last waves in the contest and outmaneuvering a fellow “geezer” who’d tried to shove him off his board and steal the wave.

That was just one victory in a lifetime of big wins on the water.

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As the first president of the Surfrider Foundation, co-founder of Friends of the River and a veteran political strategist, Caughlan spent decades blending surfing, environmentalism and insider political muscle to protect public access to the coast and the fragile ecosystems that sustain it.

Known for his constant smile and, in later years, his shock of white hair, Caughlan (pronounced Cog-lann) spent most of his career at his own media consultancy. He worked out of a creekside house outfitted with pinball machines and ephemera from successful environmental and political campaigns. These ranged from a California Highway Patrol campaign to promote motorcycle safety in the 1980s to a U.S. Supreme Court victory in the fight to ensure public access to Martin’s Beach on the San Mateo County Coast in the 2010s.



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His ongoing work was to create a Pacifica reef to preserve the shoreline. He also embraced the concept of “green burials,” to promote environmentally sustainable cemeteries by eliminating embalming, coffins and carbon emissions from cremation.

This last campaign was reflected in plans for his own burial at Purisima Cemetery in Half Moon Bay. Caughlan died suddenly at his home in the Sunnybrae neighborhood of San Mateo, on Jan. 17, just four days after the death of his wife, Diana, from lung cancer.

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He was 82 and had been undergoing treatment for colon cancer, but according to his daughter, Christy, “He died of a broken heart. I really believe that.”

He left a legacy as one of surfing’s most influential advocates.



Rob Caughlan surfs at Linda Mar beach in Pacifica in 1990.  
Courtesy of Don Montgomery

“Rob caught a lot of waves. He believed in having fun while doing good,” said Mark Simon, a retired longtime political writer for both the Peninsula Times Tribune and the Chronicle, who knew Caughlan professionally for more than 50 years. “He could get anyone on the phone and then had a knack for getting them to support the good causes he was trying to promote.”

Simon used to hang out in the office of Caughlan’s PR firm, Roanoke Co., just to hear who would pick up the phone after Caughlan dialed it.

“He got Arlo Guthrie to cut a public service announcement for motorcycle safety, and he got William Shatner to ride a killer whale to publicize California’s Endangered Species Act,” said Simon, who wrote a tribute to Caughlan in his weekly column in the San Mateo Daily Journal. “He convinced Ted Turner to fund a TV series on the future of the planet.”

Robert Willis Caughlan was born in Alliance, Ohio, on Feb. 27, 1943. His father, Willis, was a parachute instructor with the U.S. Army. When Rob was 4, his dad died and Caughlan and his younger brother, Larry, were raised by their mother, Jeanne, and grandmother, Nevada Dunn. In 1950, the extended family moved to San Mateo. Caughlan was 7 or 8 when he first saw the ocean. He rode his first wave in 1959, when he was 16, starting at the breakwater in Half Moon Bay.

It helped that he was a strong swimmer, having competed in high school in the 500-yard freestyle, the longest event in the pool, for the San Mateo High Bearcats.

Caughlan and his friend Rick Eastman surfed together as teenagers at Linda Mar, Half Moon Bay, and Pleasure Point in Santa Cruz, bringing Larry along.

“The Caughlan brothers were both very good surfers,” said Eastman. Caughlan's fellow surfers dubbed him "Birdlegs" because of his spindly legs atop his board.

Eastman took trips through the years with Caughlan to Costa Rica, the north shore of Oahu and Kauai, and camping up and down the California coast. Once when they were driving to Santa Cruz on Highway 1 in Eastman's sports car, the differential broke and sprung a leak. They limped into a gas station where Caughlan borrowed a welding torch, crawled under the car and fixed it — which surprised Eastman because Caughlan had never said anything about knowing how to weld.

“That was typical of Rob. He never bragged about what he could do, He would just do it and you'd be amazed,” said Eastman, a retired airline management consultant who lives in Millbrae.

The direction of Caughlan's life took shape in his senior year in high school, 1960-61, when President John Kennedy put out his call for service in his inaugural address, with the famous line, “Ask not what your country can do for you.”

“Many of us — including me — took that challenge seriously,” he later wrote, “so I began looking for a way.” This search took him through College of San Mateo and San Francisco State University, where he majored in political science, and met Diana Costa, who had been Miss Burlingame in 1962. They married in Jan., 1964, as he began his career as a media consultant and political operative.

“Rob always had a political streak,” said Eastman, who also attended SFSU. “He wasn't intimidated at all by power.”

His first campaign was Peninsula attorney Pete McCloskey's upset victory over former child star Shirley Temple Black for a vacated seat in Congress, in 1967. According to Simon, Caughlan, a low-level campaign worker, caught the eye of political consultant Sandy Weiner, one of the earliest political consultants who hired him for his San Francisco firm, Weiner and Co.

This led to victorious political campaigns Caughlan worked on behalf of Dianne Feinstein for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and Alan Cranston for U.S. Senate. He also ran the district office for Leo Ryan, the Peninsula congressman assassinated at Jonestown.



Rob Caughlan with former President Jimmy Carter in 1988.

Courtesy of Diana Caughlan

Caughlan had a keen eye for national politics — in the early 1970s he launched the Sam Ervin Fan Club, to promote the Southern senator whose investigation of the Watergate scandal helped lead to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. He then formed Conservationists for Carter during the 1976 presidential campaign. This earned him a job in Washington as an environmental adviser to President Jimmy Carter— the only California surfer in the administration.

Caughlan's evolution into a campaigner on issues culminated with the battle to save public access to Martin's Beach, south of Half Moon Bay.

In 2008, venture capitalist Vinod Khosla had bought the property and cut off public access. That led to a lawsuit in 2013 by the Surfrider Foundation, which Caughlan had served as president from 1984 to 1991.

Caughlan recruited his old friend McCloskey and McCloskey's law partner, the famed litigator Joe Cotchett, to fight the Martin's Beach closure. To draw attention to the lawsuit, Caughlan and McCloskey led a highly publicized march past the locked gate and down to the beach, thinking they'd be arrested, in March 2013. But they were treated like heroes, even by the sheriff's deputies on duty.

"We always win these fights," Caughlan said at a rally that day before 20 supporters. "So for Vinod Khosla to come in here and think he can push us all around is really shortsighted."

The legal tussle went on for five more years, but the U.S. Supreme Court in 2018 left in place a lower court ruling guaranteeing public access to Martin’s Beach when it declined to hear Khosla’s appeal.

While other litigation over Martin’s Beach is ongoing between Khosla and the California Coastal Commission, “The final U.S. Supreme Court decision to open the beach to surfers and the public would not have happened without Rob,” said Cotchett. “He was the driving force.”

The beach held special personal significance for Caughlan. In his 2020 memoir “The Surfer in the White House and Other Salty Yarns,” he wrote, “In my life, my pursuit of happiness was pursuing and catching and riding about 50,000 waves. I want to pursue that happiness a few more times with my grandsons at Martin’s Beach.”

Caughlan continued surfing into his late 70s, even after having both hips replaced. As recently as last November he watched grandsons Luca Massei, now 22, and Elio Jordan Massei, 19, surf in Pacifica, where he had taught them on annual trips from their home in Tuscany.

“Since the ocean covers most of the earth, loving the sea is just planetary patriotism” he wrote in the postscript to his book. “The stakes couldn’t be higher. Huge waves of change are already upon us. We will either ride them or be wiped out by them.”

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Sam Whiting has been a staff writer at The San Francisco Chronicle since 1988. He started as a feature writer in the People section, which was anchored by Herb Caen’s column, and has written about people ever since. He is a general assignment reporter with a focus on writing feature-length obituaries. He lives in San Francisco and walks three miles a day on the steep city streets.

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