MEMORIAL RESOLUTION
ISABELLA AIONA ABBOTT
(1919-2010)

Isabella Abbott, Professor of Biology, died on October 28, 2010 at her home overlooking the turquoise coastline of Oahu, Hawaii at age of 91. She joined the Biology Department as a lecturer in 1960, and in 1971 was promoted to become the first female full Professor of Biology in the University’s history because of her renowned contributions to the knowledge of marine algae. She retired from Stanford University in 1982.

She was born in Honolulu, and grew up near Waikiki. Her mother was a native Hawaiian and taught her the value and diversity of the many plants of Hawaii. Her father was of Chinese ancestry. Izzie, as she preferred to be called, attended the University of Hawaii and graduated on the eve of World War II in 1941. There she met a fellow student, Don Abbott. Izzie made the jump to graduate school by attending the University of Michigan (M.S., 1942), and then married Don Abbott and entered the Ph.D. program at UC Berkeley. After earning her Ph.D. in 1950, the first woman of native Hawaiian descent to do so, she and Don moved to Stanford and the Hopkins Marine Station. In 1956, Izzie joined the faculty as a Research Associate and Lecturer. In 1972, Izzy was promoted from Lecturer to Full Professor of Biology.

Izzie was the foremost authority on the algae of the Pacific Ocean basin, particularly the California coast, co-authoring the 752 page ‘Marine Algae of the Monterey Peninsula California’ in 1969 and the 827 page ‘Marine Algae of California’ in 1976 as well as nearly 200 other papers and publications. Her 1984 book “Limu: An Ethnobotanical study of some Hawaiian seaweeds” is in it’s fourth edition.

Izzie was awarded the Darbaker Prize by the Botanical Society of America in 1969, was elected President of the Western Society of Naturalists in 1977, received the Charles Reed Bishop medal in 1993, and the Gilbert Morgan Smith Medal from the National Academy of Sciences in 1997. After retiring from Stanford University in 1982, she and her husband, Biology Professor emeritus Donald Abbott moved to Hawaii where she continued her research and expanded her focus to include native Hawaiian plants of economic and cultural importance. Abbott was on the Board of Directors of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, and was named a ‘Living Treasure’ in Hawaii in 2005.

Izzie was a consummate teacher and a role model to a generation of women scholars who she trained in marine Botany. As a native Hawaiian, her inspirations were born in a culture that appreciated the value of biodiversity and that carefully used the algal cornucopia of Hawaiian reefs. After retirement, and the death of Don Abbott, her home in Honolulu became a central meeting ground for researchers across the world who were uncovering new knowledge about the world of marine algae. She maintained an active research life, and became the Wilder Professor of Botany at the University of Hawaii. She delighted in rediscovering the ancient uses of newly named seaweeds, and conducted
extensive interviews with Hawaiian elders to connect cultural values with modern biodiversity. Her extensive compilation of botanical and cultural knowledge led to her nine volume series “Taxonomy of economic seaweeds” published from 1985 to 2004.

In Izzie’s home in Honolulu hung an old quilt sewn by her grandmother at the turn of the 19th century. Sewn into the quilt was a model of the flag of the nation of Hawaii, banned by the U.S. territorial government that overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy in 1898. When others began talking about the many accomplishments of her life, Izzie would look over at the flag. “Making a Hawaiian flag was illegal,” she would say. “But nobody bothered the old ladies making quilts. They found a way to have their voice and pass it along to future generations. Why should I try to do less?”

Stephen R. Palumbi
Jane and Marshall Steel Jr. Professor
Harold A. Miller Director
Hopkins Marine Station
Department of Biology