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The Sea of Cortez: Sailing with the Spirits of John
Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts on a New Voyage of
Discovery Around Baja California

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authors, chapters arranged by subject with a discussion of trends; a chronological perspective illuminating years when Steinbeck research was most productive; institutional distribution listings; foreign dissertations; a summary of articles suggesting areas for scholarly investigation; and a title index.

There are, of course, many more books and articles written about Steinbeck during these two years. Here, I haven't tried to touch on the subjects of the continuing battle over censorship, the impact of Oprah Winfrey's selection of *East of Eden* for her book club, or reviews of plays being staged not only in this country but in Europe as well. With the war in the Middle East, renewed interest worldwide in Steinbeck's wartime reporting has resulted in several excellent essays on *Bombs Away* and *Once There Was a War*. Caroline Kennedy's *A Patriot's America* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), includes in a section entitled "Work, Opportunity, and Invention" an excerpt from *The Grapes of Wrath*, which I feel certain would have pleased John Steinbeck. Bibliographic work is intense and time-consuming, but I find it a great pleasure to research and write about a distinguished author I have admired and respected for a lifetime.

THE SEA OF CORTEZ: SAILING WITH THE SPIRITS OF JOHN STEINBECK AND EDWARD F. RICKETTS ON A NEW VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY AROUND BAJA CALIFORNIA

JON CHRISTENSEN

Steinbeck Fellow and Hopkins Marine Station Biologist Plan to Retrace Steinbeck/Ricketts Expedition in Spring 2004
Students can follow the voyage on the Web

In the spring of 1940, John Steinbeck and his friend, marine biologist Edward Ricketts, embarked on a voyage they had long dreamed of making together, and not a season too soon. As the storms of war engulfed Europe and the Far East, threatening to bring the United States into World War II, they sailed on the *Western Flyer*, a sardine fishing boat, from Monterey Bay south around Baja California to the Sea of Cortez.

Their goal was to collect samples of the creatures living in the intertidal zone along what was then a little explored coast-

line. But more than that, they just wanted to be themselves: a writer and a scientist in search of a natural philosophy to guide them in a world about to come apart at the seams.

A year earlier, Ricketts had published his scientific masterpiece, *Between Pacific Tides*, a groundbreaking analysis of the community ecology of the intertidal zones, which is still the standard in the field, and Steinbeck had published *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck had known Ed Ricketts for ten years. Ricketts was the inspiration for “Doc” in *Cannery Row* (1945) and *Sweet Thursday* (1954) as well as the model for wise characters in many other Steinbeck books. The long conversations they had in Ricketts’s lab in Monterey deeply shaped Steinbeck’s thinking and the themes in his work.

The trip to the Sea of Cortez was fated to be their only true collaboration. The book that resulted from the six-week adventure sailing 4,000 miles around Baja and back—*Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research*—was published a year later, the day before Pearl Harbor was bombed. A hybrid of natural history, taxonomic catalog, and travelog, it was quickly forgotten by all but diehard aficionados of Steinbeck and of the marine biology of the Gulf of California. So few copies were printed that it now commands hundreds of dollars in the antiquarian book trade. In 1951, Steinbeck published the narrative portion of the book as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. It remains in print today and is a popular and inspiring story of purposeful wanderlust.

Like many readers, I put down the book thinking someday it would be neat to retrace their voyage to see how things have changed and what has remained the same. As a freelance science writer for *The New York Times* and other publications, I have been following the dramatic changes in our coastal and ocean ecosystems. The web of life in our oceans is being pulled apart as top predators like tuna have crashed from overfishing; trawling for groundfish and scallops has scraped the bottom clean like a parking lot; and pollution and nutrient-rich runoff have fed algae blooms and a jellyfish explosion, resulting in what one scientist calls “the sliming of the oceans.”

I suspected that all of these trends could be seen in the Gulf of California. I have traveled the length of Baja on land. I have seen the results of the post-World War II boom in tourism, which has only accelerated in recent years, and the widespread

availability of outboard motors, which had not arrived when Steinbeck and Ricketts brought their cantankerous “Sea Cow” down. I dove for scallops with locals during one Easter trip, the same time of year Steinbeck and Ricketts were there. The beaches were packed with vacationers when I was there, in stark contrast with the lonely shoreline and occasional primitive villages they encountered.

But I also knew there are vast stretches of the coastline that were still inaccessible except by boat. And I wanted to see them, before they too were inexorably changed.

When I was visiting the Hopkins Marine Station in Monterey in the spring of 2003, I met Bill Gilly, a soft-spoken biologist who studies squid, octopus, and cuttlefish. Gilly was showing a group of us from the Knight Professional Journalism Fellowship at Stanford around the tide pools just outside his lab. He was affectionately describing the different critters in a way that really seemed to convey their character in the community, in much the same way Ricketts did, and I asked Gilly about the intelligence of these animals. He invited me back to his lab where he showed me his pet octopus, the cuttlefish that he is teaching to change colors on their bodies to form Xs in return for their favorite food (fresh crab), and a video of the giant Humboldt squid that he is studying in the Gulf of California. The video shows the squid flashing colors at each other in a synchronized fashion, as if they are communicating.

We talked a bit about what Steinbeck had learned from Ricketts, and how the people of Cannery Row are like the denizens of a tide pool, each with their own niche and character shaped by that environment. Then Gilly dropped a bombshell. Imagine my surprise when he told me he was talking with Frank Donahue, captain of the fishing boat the *Gus D*, about retracing the voyage of the *Western Flyer*. And he invited me to come along. He told me he wants to keep the expedition as close to the spirit of the original as possible—a low-cost, bare bones, leisurely voyage of research and discovery.

So, in the spring of 2004, we will retrace the path of Steinbeck and Ricketts. We will explore what has changed. But we will be open to new discoveries as well.

On the surface, the Sea of Cortez remains the same, timeless. But underneath, it has changed, like all the oceans of the world. We will explore those changes by collecting specimens and mak-

ing scientific comparisons. We will talk about what they mean and what can be done in the Sea of Cortez to bring the ecosystem back from the brink.

And we will explore changes in science and philosophy. Ricketts argued strongly for “non-teleological” thinking, a kind of “be here now” attitude before its time, seeing the world as nonpurposeful, nondirected, full of actors acting and reacting in the moment. While it is still easy to slip into that frame of mind off the coast of Baja, Gilly’s work on the intelligence of invertebrates is a window deeper into the soul of the living things that share our world. And we will talk about how changes in science are changing how we see the natural world on our voyage.

We know that many things have changed since Steinbeck and Ricketts set off to escape the hubbub of the world and find a space they could explore together. But other things are eerily similar. They embarked on their voyage in a world on the brink of war into a time and place of tranquility that was about to be shattered. We travel from a world at war into a time and place of uneasy tranquility that has almost been destroyed. We go to find out what it is worth before it is too late.

Students and others will be able to follow our voyage on the Web (information will be available on the website of the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University: <http://www.sjsu.edu/steinbeck/>). We will be organizing a symposium on the expedition during the fall of 2003 and a report after the trip in the spring of 2004 at San Jose State University. If you would like more information about the expedition or any of these activities, or if you have any suggestions for helping us to bring this event to the widest possible audience, please feel free to contact me.

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Sperry Flour Co. Mill, Salinas, 1904.