

A Hundred and One Natural History Books That You Should Read Before You Die

7. John Steinbeck's *The Log From the Sea of Cortez*

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Some relationships are legendary: Laurel and Hardy, Lennon and McCartney, Stanley and Livingstone, Astaire and Rodgers, ... Han and Chewbacca. While each person individually showed an impressive level of accomplishment on their own, together they formed a creative, iconic couplet that transcended who they were by themselves.

John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts together formed such a pair.

John Steinbeck is, of course, known to most people as one of America's leading fiction writers of the 20th century. His explorations of the human condition, amidst the challenges of the Great Depression in the 1930s – particularly *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* – feature prominently on any list of great American literature.

Less well known, at least outside the circles of marine biology and tide pool exploration, is Ed Ricketts. Ricketts was an accomplished marine biologist who helped develop and document an ecological view to the natural history of coastal ecosystems in Western North America. As founder, proprietor, and often sole employee of Pacific Biological

Laboratories in Monterey, California, Ricketts' career as a marine biologist and specimen collector was the perfect setting for his practice of natural history that demonstrated his ability to describe with honesty and accuracy the ecological bases for the distribution of coastal organisms along the Pacific Coast.

Both Steinbeck and Ricketts were core members of a group of men and women who adopted Ricketts' lab in Monterey as their home base – almost a clubhouse – throughout the 1930s as they collectively explored topics ranging from jazz to science to romantic relationships.

The pair became fast friends, I think finding in each other characteristics that both complemented and completed the other with respect to their own self-identities. Ricketts even played the role of muse, forming the basis for the character "Doc" in Steinbeck's novels *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*.

It was in this setting, fueled primarily by Ricketts' infectious enthusiasm, that Steinbeck's interest in marine biology was ignited. Steinbeck was thoroughly disappointed, and somewhat worn down, by the critical attacks on *The Grapes of*

Wrath upon its release in 1939. The politics of agriculture and land speculation in California being what they were in the 1930s, Steinbeck's portrayal of the economic and social hardships faced by farmers displaced from the Dust Bowl to the West was initially not well received by many.

Steinbeck redirected his interests, at least temporarily, toward natural history and travel narrative. Ricketts had been contemplating several new field surveys to build upon his earlier descriptive work of the central Californian coast, and he readily included Steinbeck in his plans.

For a variety of reasons – including the onset of World War II, Steinbeck's later move to New York, and Ricketts' death in 1948 – the only one of the projects to be completed was a specimen collecting expedition to the Gulf of California – the Sea of Cortez, lying between Baja California and Mexico – in March and April of 1940.

Ricketts and Steinbeck contracted with the captain and crew of an off-season sardine purse seiner, the *Western Flyer*, to cruise down the California coast and then, upon entering the Gulf of California, bend all of their efforts to collecting thoroughly and systematically in all kinds of tidal environments.

The plan from the start was for both men to keep journals of the expedition, describing where they went and what they observed, both biologically and culturally, but only Ricketts saw this through. There is a record of astonishing detail about intertidal life in the Gulf over the almost 40 days of their voyage. They were not the first to conduct a biological survey of the

region, but they were the first to do so with an open mind as to what they were looking for. As a result, they discovered dozens of new species, documented range extensions for many more, and revealed details about the ecological relationships among species with each other and with their environment that were previously unknown.

However, what makes this a must-read book is not just the wealth of biological details reported, but the diversity of subjects it leads the reader through and the humor and insight with which it does so. For example:

On the practice of natural history: “The true biologist deals with life, with teeming boisterous life, and learns something from it, learns that the first rule of life is living. The dry-balls [*biologists who do not go into the field*] cannot possibly learn a thing every starfish knows in the core of its soul and in the vesicles between his rays.”

On scientific specialization: “A few naturalists with specialties had gone into the Gulf, and, in the way of specialists, had seen nothing they hadn't wanted to.”

On scientific writing: “It has seemed sometimes that the little men in scientific work assumed the awe-fullness of a priesthood to hide their deficiencies, as a witch-doctor does with stilts and high masks ... It is usually found that only the little stuffy men object to what is called ‘popularization,’ by which they mean writing with a clarity understandable to one not familiar with the tricks and codes of the cult.”

On outfitting an expedition: “The medical kit had been given a good deal of thought. There were Nembotal, butesin picrate for

sunburn, . . . , alcaroid, and, last, some whiskey for medicinal purposes. This did not survive our leave-taking, but since no one was ill on the whole trip, it may have done its job very well.”

On materialism: “Americans, and probably all northern peoples, are all masses of wants growing out of inner insecurity.”

And along the way, time and again, they touch upon the subjects of technology, war, peasant life, miraculous apparitions, development, hunting, Indian pragmatism, non-teleological thinking, marine conservation, and the esoteric mysteries of the sea.

Oddly, it was Ricketts, not Steinbeck, who made the most complete record of their journey, and it has been widely noted that the book would be better described as having been written by Ricketts and edited (albeit heavily) by Steinbeck.

Credit, however, is given to Steinbeck for the book, largely due to historical contingency. *The Log from the Sea of*

Cortez is, in fact, the narrative portion of an earlier, largely unread, account of the expedition, *Sea of Cortez*, credited to both Steinbeck and Ricketts. After Ricketts’ death in 1948, Steinbeck, at the urging of his editor, reworked the earlier book to emphasize the narrative, secured the rights from Ricketts’ son, and added an extensive and moving foreword – “About Ed Ricketts” – as a eulogy to his friend.

The convoluted history of the book’s authorship, however, does little to diminish its power. Steinbeck maintained a plural perspective in the narrative, emphasizing that the narrator is a “we” and not an “I,” making it clear that it is, in fact, a story being told by both of them.

And their story is a remarkable view into a world, both natural and cultural, long gone by, told with humor and an eye that remains visionary even in the present day.

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