



# Telling Our Way to the Sea: A Voyage of Discovery in the Sea of Cortez

*Aaron Hirsh*

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**Telling Our Way to the Sea: A Voyage of Discovery in the Sea of Cortez** Aaron Hirsh  
**A luminous and revelatory journey into the science of life and the depths of the human experience**

By turns epic and intimate, *Telling Our Way to the Sea* is both a staggering revelation of unraveling ecosystems and a profound meditation on our changing relationships with nature—and with one another.

When the biologists Aaron Hirsh and Veronica Volny, along with their friend Graham Burnett, a historian of science, lead twelve college students to a remote fishing village on the Sea of Cortez, they come upon a bay of dazzling beauty and richness. But as the group pursues various threads of investigation—ecological and evolutionary studies of the sea, the desert, and their various species of animals and plants; the stories of local villagers; the journals of conquistadors and explorers—they recognize that the bay, spectacular and pristine though it seems, is but a ghost of what it once was. Life in the Sea of Cortez, they realize, has been reshaped by complex human ideas and decisions—the laws and economics of fishing, property, and water; the dreams of developers and the fantasies of tourists seeking the wild; even efforts to retrieve species from the brink of extinction—all of which have caused dramatic upheavals in the ecosystem. It is a painful realization, but the students discover a way forward.

After weathering a hurricane and encountering a rare whale in its wake, they come to see that the bay's best chance of recovery may in fact reside in our own human stories, which can weave a compelling memory of the place. Glimpsing the intricate and ever-shifting web of human connections with the Sea of Cortez, the students comprehend anew their own place in the natural world—suspended between past and future, teetering between abundance and loss. The redemption in their difficult realization is that as they find their places in a profoundly altered environment, they also recognize their roles in the path ahead, and ultimately come to see one another, and themselves, in a new light.

In *Telling Our Way to the Sea*, Hirsh's voice resounds with compassionate humanity, capturing the complex beauty of both the marine world he explores and the people he explores it with. Vibrantly alive with sensitivity and nuance, *Telling Our Way to the Sea* transcends its genre to become literature.

## Telling Our Way to the Sea: A Voyage of Discovery in the Sea of Cortez Details

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Author : Aaron Hirsh

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Cortez Aaron Hirsh**

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## **From Reader Review Telling Our Way to the Sea: A Voyage of Discovery in the Sea of Cortez for online ebook**

### **A says**

Many years ago I read *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, by John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts about their 1940 collecting journey to Baja California. This is not a sequel in any way, but the title of this book piqued my interest. This book is about a 21st century field study with college students to Bahia de Los Angeles lead by the author, his wife Veronica Volny and their friend Graham Burnett, a science historian and thinker. The students may have expectations about what they will learn and see during this trip, although one hopes that eyes will be opened to unexpected experiences and ways of thinking.

Hirsh brings history into the story, including Hernán Cortés reports to the King of Spain and how he described his encounters with the people. There is some interesting conjecture on the analogies used. One cannot help but bring their own preconceptions, and how do we go beyond them?

There is also beautiful descriptive writing in this book. There is one overwhelming trip in the pangs and Hirsch fills the pages with concise yet poetic descriptions of what they see. "I've already seen brief flashes of yellowtail and skyjack—and the birds have gathered overhead to feast on the panicked throng. Attacked from above and below, the grunion swarm and writhe like eels, catching the sunlight on their sides and frothing the sea into an emulsion of white foam, shattered mirror, and fish blood. The ceaseless roar of a waterfall is punctuated by the percussive of a shooting range—po, pop-pop, pop—as boobies dive-bomb the shoal from high above: folding their wings, they plunge fast, puncture the mayhem heedlessly. Meanwhile, the pelicans belly flop clumsily into the thick of things and come up with their gullets full of saltwater. One smacks down face-first right beside our boat. As he lifts his head the sea drools from the sides of his beak and the membranous double chin deflates, revealing within it the wriggling shape of a fish; for a second, the bird looks disconcerted, stricken with a swollen and spastic epiglottis; but then he tilts his head gluttonously back and ends the struggle with a single hard swallow."

And importantly, in addition to encounters with the sea creatures, are the encounters with the people who live in this small community, how they change how one looks at a place and interacts with it. Is it the heart of the people which makes the difference?

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### **Naomi says**

A splendid journey of many interconnected stories, inviting us to better and deeper understanding of this world of which we are but one part, of how we perceive and create the stories of our lives, and of the interdependence of being, Hirsh educates and inspires his readers. Recommended for spiritual writing groups, and all those concerned with a sense of place or the well-being of our planet.

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### **Kirk Astroth says**

Outstanding. I loved this book.

## **Liana says**

Having been to the Vermilion Sea Field Station, this book was a one-way ticket back to that special place. It's now part of the cherished few books I own a copy of and have proudly positioned on my bookshelf!

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## **Katrina says**

I absolutely love this book and would give it 6 stars if I could--it's poetic, thoughtful, educational, sensitive ... and, well, I can't say it better than (or as well as) the book jacket:

By turns epic and intimate, Telling Our Way to the Sea is both a staggering revelation of unraveling ecosystems and a profound meditation on our changing relationship with nature--and with one another.

Here's the lovely first sentence of the book:

A school of needlefish parts to stream around me, and I find myself momentarily among the silver traces of a comet shower.

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## **Rick says**

The quintessential book on experiential marine biology

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## **Dan Pettus says**

Outstanding. As a high school Ecology teacher myself, Dr. Hirsch's deep understanding and connections made between nature, people and place will be a lifelong goal to emulate.

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## **Steve says**

If you enjoy thoughtful, well-written books with beautiful descriptions of nature, then you will love Telling Our Way to the Sea by college professor Aaron Hirsh. Professor Hirsh and two other college professors take students to the Sea of Cortez where an intense biology curriculum is undertaken. While the professors love their work introducing students to the various topics relevant to biological and evolutionary science, the book shines with the author's insightful thoughts on various subjects, including how perceptions morph depending on the background of the person perceiving, how mankind seems intent on quickly eliminating various species, and how the students devour the experience. Concerning mankind's overfishing of various species, the author does not assign blame, although there is sufficient blame to go around. The book has some pure science, but not too much for the lay reader. The erudite author has an impressive vocabulary, so I recommend keeping a dictionary nearby, or reading the book on a Kindle, where it is effortless to look up a word. I really enjoyed the author's beautiful writing about the flora and fauna. I recommend this book for

anyone interested in our natural world. I wish I could give this book more than five stars.

I hope to read more of the author's writing soon. May I suggest a similarly styled book about the Gulf of Mexico?

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## Mike says

For me, this book instantly places Aaron Hirsh in the company of our finest explainers: Gould, McPhee, Medawar -- that company. What Hirsh explains here is how to hold a conversation about our environment. The key, he says, is in the act of telling, and therefore in the act of listening.

His subject is the Sea of Cortez, aka the Gulf of California. Hirsh and his wife, both biologists, along with their science historian colleague, teach a summer college course at a marine station in Baja. The book is framed around one summer's experience.

The sea is in trouble. Even though it seems to teem with marine life, we learn that the waters are a ghost town compared to just fifty years ago. Systematic overfishing of the commercially valuable species, by both local and foreign operations, has caused populations to crash. The central question of the book is: what should we do about this?

It's a setup you're familiar with, but Hirsh approaches it in a way you haven't seen before. He gives us an interwoven collection of stories -- the experience of his students as they come to understand the life of these waters, the economic tug-of-war between the fishermen, land developers, and conservationists, and Hirsh's brilliant accounts of the human and natural history of the region.

On their own, these narrative threads are well worth reading. Hirsh's prose has a literary feel, always stately and assured, but with an astounding range that can handle technical exposition, real emotion, and even comedy without strain. A sample:

'At daybreak, fiery light pierced the folds of gray--the faded silver sky, the drifting tatters of fog, the mist rising off the bay--and struck our faces for the first time in four days. The desert steamed like a newborn landscape. The cardón and cirio looked clean and alive; every spine pricked a tiny droplet quivering with light. It was as if we'd blinked awake just in time to catch the sea being separated from the sky, the earth from the sea.'

These stories, however, reach beyond themselves. The discussion of the evolution of the humble sea cucumber serves also as a critique of the contingent nature of scientific understanding. The story the domestic dog's origins also shows us that careful thinking sometimes leads us not to a 'right answer' but to 'right answers'. Each of his stories carries double meaning, about the fragility of our knowledge of the natural world.

What to do about this, Hirsh suggests, is to hold a conversation. This conversation needs to involve all the stakeholders, and requires patience. The fisherman, the scientist, the artist, and the developer each have something to share that the other doesn't fully appreciate. Just as the interactions between the denizens of the sea balance out to an ecological whole, so might we find some balance between our collective observations and ideas, and change course.

Note: the author is a friend of mine.

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### **Leonard says**

I love this book. It is so inviting-- the characters are all alive, and the place is so rich. I am not a biologist but I felt drawn in to the reflections on evolution. I just didn't want it to end. You'll love it.

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### **Anders Halverson says**

Great book. By weaving together threads of social analysis, science, and history, Hirsh has created one of the most thoughtful and beautiful books I have read in a long time.

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