

The Western Flyer Project



In 1940, the Western Flyer carried scientist Edward F. Ricketts and author John Steinbeck on a groundbreaking expedition to Mexico's Gulf of California. Our goal is to stir curiosity in science and literature by providing rich and rewarding education, research, and creative opportunities aboard this historic vessel.

Why is this boat so famous? In the spring of 1940, John Steinbeck and his close friend, marine biologist Ed Ricketts, chartered the *Western Flyer*, a sardine purse-seiner built in 1937 in Tacoma, WA, to take them on a 6-week expedition to the Sea of Cortez to collect marine invertebrates. Ricketts was a visionary marine ecologist who saw connections between animals and communities in relation to their particular habitats. He was a broad thinker and had a profound influence on Steinbeck's work during their nearly two decades of friendship—and beyond. Both men developed a strong belief that relationships were the key to understanding the natural world – one that contains both humans and intertidal invertebrates.

Their collaboration resulted in publication of *Sea of Cortez* in December, 1941 (reissued in 1951 as the *Log from the Sea of Cortez*). It is an ecological classic that provides a deep view into the holistic philosophy of both scientist and author. In fact, Steinbeck claimed that *Sea of Cortez* was his favorite among all of his works. As he notes in the introduction:

We take a tiny colony of soft corals from a rock in a little water world. And that isn't terribly important to the tide pool. Fifty miles away the Japanese shrimp boats are dredging with overlapping scoops, bringing up tons of shrimps, rapidly destroying the species so that it may never come back, and with the species destroying the ecological balance of the whole region. That isn't very important in the world. And thousands of miles away the great bombs are falling and the stars are not moved thereby. None of it is important or all of it is. J. Steinbeck and E.F. Ricketts (1941) *Sea of Cortez*

What is the mission of the Western Flyer Foundation? We are restoring this historic vessel to create a state-of-art education-research platform to facilitate shore and at-sea projects designed by teachers and students. To carry this out we will develop community-based educational programs modeled on Steinbeck and Ricketts's approach to understanding place, environment, community, and connections. Our approach will combine art and science, music and literature, engineering and dance.

What is our plan? The *Western Flyer* is being restored in Port Townsend, WA, and will be brought back to Monterey in 2021 -- eighty years after publication of *Sea of Cortez*. In Monterey, we will operate for six months each year working with regional schools; and six months each year will be spent visiting ports of call on the Pacific coast from the Sea of Cortez to Southeast Alaska. Projects in ports of call will be generated by local teachers and community groups. The maiden voyage of the *Western Flyer* to the Sea of Cortez will be in spring 2022.



What will we do?

Programs will be community based and integrate environmental studies, history, art, and humanities—a holistic approach inspired by Steinbeck’s and Ricketts’s interest in human and intertidal communities.

Operations in Monterey Bay will include structured, organized activities for classes that require one day of vessel time. We will also support major projects for middle- and high-school classes that require more extensive use of the vessel. These projects will have both science and humanities components.

Projects in ports of call must have a clear scientific purpose with a well-developed humanities component and take advantage of the *Western Flyer* with a program of up to 5 days duration.

What is our philosophy?

Layered programming: Our approach to both outreach and projects will be structured in line with Ricketts’s and Steinbeck’s shared notions about a multi-layered appreciation of the environment and of texts.

- **Level 1, Participatory study:** Identifying and considering details of a particular problem – place and questions about animals, plants, and the habitat.
- **Level 2, Community:** Evaluating the nature of relationships among and between issues, animals, humans, ideas.
- **Level 3, Life histories:** Tracing histories of a problem, question, place, issue.
- **Level 4, Universality:** Identifying wider implications of study and how it relates to world – *what is the big picture?*
- **Level 5, Emergence:** Developing a holistic appreciation of how findings of a project lead to new studies and discoveries – *how is the total is greater than the sum of the parts?*

“...all things are one thing, and that one thing is all things – plankton, a shimmering phosphorescence on the sea and the spinning planets and an expanding universe, all bound together by the elastic string of time. It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and back to the tide pool again.”

J. Steinbeck and E.F. Ricketts (1941)
Sea of Cortez



Sail Rock, Sea of Cortez, April 2004. Photo by Nancy Burnett