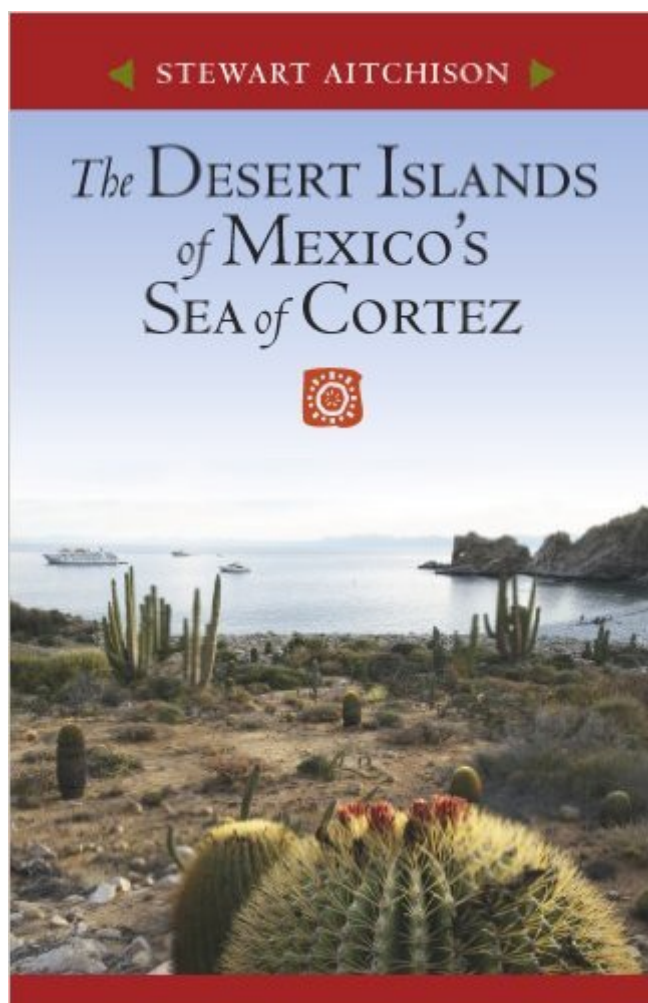


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# The Desert Islands Of Mexico's Sea Of Cortez



## Synopsis

The desert islands in the Sea of Cortez are little known except to a few intrepid tourists, sailors, and fishermen. Though at first glance these stark islands may appear barren, they are a refuge for an astounding variety of plants and animals. While many of the species are typical of the greater Sonoran Desert region, some are endemic or unique to one or two islands. For example, Isla Santa Catalina is home to the world's only rattlesnake that has lost its ability to grow a rattle. Other islands host nesting birds, such as Isla Rasa, a tiny, flat flow of basalt lava that attracts nearly half a million elegant and royal terns and Heermann's gulls each spring. The Desert Islands of Mexico's Sea of Cortez is one of the few books devoted to the biogeography of this remarkable part of the world. The book explores the geologic origin of the gulf and its islands, presents some of the basics of island biogeography, details insular life—including residents of the intertidal zone—and provides a brief outlook for preserving this area. More than a simple guidebook, Aitchison's writing will take both actual and armchair travelers through a gripping tale of natural history. Like the rest of our fragile planet, the Sea of Cortez and its islands are threatened by humans. Overfishing has eliminated or greatly diminished many fish stocks, and dams on rivers that once flowed into the gulf prevent certain nutrients from reaching the sea. The tenuousness of this area makes the book's extraordinary photographs and the firsthand descriptions by a well-known teacher, writer, and photographer all the more compelling.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Stewart Aitchison has done it again. For decades Aitchison has been a reliable guide to the natural

history of the Southwest. He is best known for his books about the Grand Canyon, but this book shows that he is also a good guide for a far less well-known place. But the Grand Canyon isn't so far from the Sea of Cortez, geologically speaking, for it was the opening of the Sea of Cortez that--geologists now believe--allowed the Colorado River to finally reach the sea and spurred the rapid carving of the Grand Canyon. This is only one of the unlikely facts you'll discover in this book. I first "visited" the Sea of Cortez through John Steinbeck's *Log*, but Aitchison's book held lots of surprises for me. His book is an enjoyable mixture of personal experiences, great photography, and natural history information--both general summaries and lots of interesting oddities. This book may have been published by a university press but it's hardly "academic," requiring only a basic familiarity with natural history.

Stewart is an excellent writer and photographer and does a great job explaining the geography and natural history of the islands. Descriptions of the islands, their geology, and the flora and fauna are liberally spiced with personal anecdotes that make me feel as though I've been there. I recommend this book to anyone interested in the Sea of Cortez.

Having planned to go whale-watching in the Sea of Cortez, I was searching .co.uk for a copy of Steinbeck's *Log* when I chanced upon this book just prior to publication. Judging by its cover - the luminosity of the photo and the sheer exoticism of Desert Islands and an X and a Z (orthographically, we Brits are easily pleased) all together in the one title - I was in for a treat. The author is a zoologist, geologist, naturalist, photographer, field biologist and teacher and has led educational expeditions in this area for over 25 years. He certainly knows his stuff. There are 922 islands and islets in the Sea, and his map lists the largest 44. His scene-setting Introduction briefly covers the climate, some desert plant characteristics and statistics, a couple of personal anecdotes and a bit about the early Spanish explorers. The first two main chapters explain the region's geology over the last 230 million years and examine the process of repopulation by plants and animals of volcanic islands following an eruption. The facts and statistics come thick and fast and, as a layman, I soon found myself having to reach for the dictionary: subduction; orographic; dinoflagellates; areal; mesic; chemolithoautotrophic hyperthermophilic archaebacteria..... Chapter 3 is a methodical north-to-south survey of the islands, logging the fauna and flora and making particular mention of the endemic species. There are lots of fine colour photographs and some are excellent - my favourite was an iguana caught eating a cactus flower - though many would look even better larger than the page size allows. But in the text, time and again I had the sense of Yet Another List of

animals or plants (each with its Latin taxonomic name italicized in brackets), thinly disguised as a very long sentence. Chapter 4 deals with the creatures in the Sea itself - whales, dolphins, seals, rays, squid, and more. The fifth concentrates on endangered species, on the disruptive effects of fertilizer runoff, and on the ecological imbalance and damage caused by non-native species of flora and fauna. Lastly, perhaps inevitably, Man's transgressions are catalogued: hunting, gathering, felling trees, lighting fires, introducing invasive species (sounds like ordinary folk trying to scrape a living, perhaps a contentious issue), mining, even tourism. This is essentially an academic work ranging across several fields, densely packed with facts and statistics, and unquestionably worthy. I have absolutely no reason to doubt the accuracy of its data or the truth of what it describes. But it reads like a college textbook, uneasily leavened with a few rather tame personal anecdotes. I felt no spark of excitement or adventure and I'm sorry to say that, for me, it never really came to life.

This is an easy to read, short and sweet book about the islands and the Baja peninsula. The author writes in easy to understand language and covers topics from geology to natural history. Highly recommend this if you are an outdoors enthusiast and plan on spending any time in this most amazing area of the world.

This well written, fascinating look at the geology, ecology and a bit of the history of the amazing desert islands is brief, only 99 pages, but packed with beautiful photos and explanations suitable for everyone. His discussions are not dry scientific lectures but lively explorations by someone who is passionate about this area of the world. He does cover many disturbing situations where humankind has destroyed or nearly destroyed some of these precious islands, but he concludes on a hopeful note with a discussion of restoration efforts.

Excellent information about the beautiful islands on the Sea of Cortez. Talks about the plants and animals that have adapted to living on these rather inhospitable islands. Gets into history also. If you are traveling through the sea of Cortez you will want this book.

Lovely introduction to the islands of Sea of Cortez. Provides inspiration to visit the area and read more literature on specific topics.

If you go to the Sea of Cortez, this is a good read.

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