

Western Flyer field trip
June 1, 2017

Writing like Steinbeck
Last Day Out

A black form a couple of hundreds yards out. None of us certain what it was. We're in the Sea of Cortez, off the southeast corner of Espriritu Santo Island, and the shape is unusual. This is our last few hours on our six-day five night trip. Five days of glorious weather and friendship, and now this is the last few hours. As the wind picked up earlier, our conversation dwindled and we wondered ahead to the challenge we are about to face on our paddle down the coast and around the tip of the island.

In camp, the magnificent frigate birds floated overhead, the waves crashed, six feet below our lava-ish table. Sally Lightfoots scampered around the waterline, dozens of them. Close up, looking over the ledge, you heard their footfalls of little drumrolls. The few sailboats far out made their ways to wherever they're going in the soft breeze that rustled their sails and brushed our faces, tossed the Whisperlite's flame heating the oatmeal water.

As we approached the floating object the wind had diminished. Not until we were less than 10 yards away could we see that a magnificent frigatebird was about to greet us, dead though it was. We all wanted to see it - a challenge to navigate three 16 foot sea kayaks around to accommodate as we bumped and jockeyed into position. The smell of death became palatable, and the bird was lifted by the wing. Kevin tipped back its head so that we could look into its eyes, study its sleek feathered neck and head. The beak did not have to fall open, and when we looked inside the mouth we saw the cause of this beautiful and inspiring birds demise. Lodged it the back of its mouth at the junction to the throat was a large inflated pufferfish with its spines standing straight out. Oh, the pain we all felt as our minds transitioned from scientific observation to the emotional pitfall of the moment that incredible bird realized that it was about to die.

As we paddled away, aiming for the end of the island and our last four miles of our voyage of discovery, I said, and I'm sure each of my companions did as well, a prayer for the bird, a prayer for the fish, and a prayer for the unforgiving and unending power of nature. For death brings life, life is impending death, and it is best to believe that the forces of nature and man are more than we can understand.