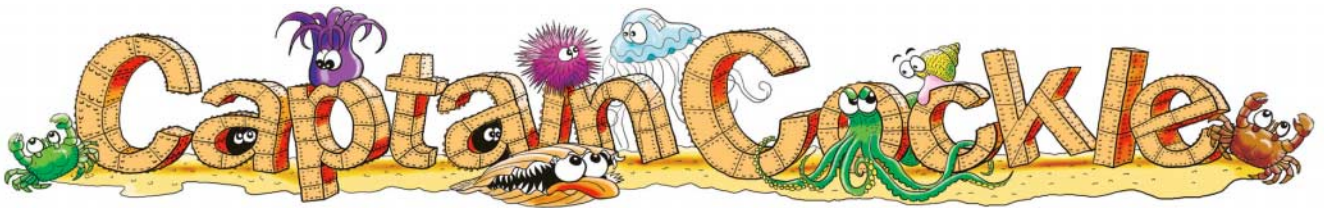


Aquatic Life



by John Joyce
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Mermaids - Fish or Fiction

The first recorded sightings of the mythical sea creatures known as 'Mermaids' - beings who are half human and half fish - date right back to early Arab sailors and the Greek, Pliny in 586 AD - with reports continuing as late as the 1900's. From our modern knowledge of marine biology, it is likely that these sightings were of marine mammals such as manatees, dugongs and the now extinct sea cow, which have paddle-shaped flippers that could resemble the famous 'mermaid's mirror' and do actually appear to cradle their young as a human mother would do. The mermaids described by Christopher Columbus off the island of Haiti, in 1493 were almost certainly manatees. He wrote that they "came quite high out of the water", but were "not as pretty as they are depicted, for somehow in the face they look like men."

The mythical Irish mermaid, or 'Morrow' is lovely and graceful however and teases men with her beauty. The legend says that, if a man can capture her red cap or cloak, she will forget her life as a mermaid and marry him, but will return to the sea immediately if she gets her cap or cloak back.



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Superstitious Fishermen

Until the development of sophisticated fish detection equipment and modern fishing methods, getting a successful catch seemed to depend a great deal on luck. This is why fishermen have traditionally been very superstitious around having luck and keeping it. For example, some fishermen would never sail from port if they passed either a nun, a cat or a rook on their way to their boat. Others would not sail if they saw a rat come ashore from their vessel, since they assumed the rat was abandoning the boat in case it might sink. At mealtimes, it was considered bad luck to stir tea with either a knife or a fork, the teapot was not to be emptied after fishing had started, for to do so might make the boat turn over and sink, or bring bad luck. Knives were not to be crossed on the table, nor was a loaf of bread to be cut and turned upside down. Salt was considered to be particularly lucky, so fishermen were not to pass the salt (since to part with salt was to part with luck). The use of certain words at sea - such as pigs, fox, cat, hare, salmon or rabbits, the church, or anything to do with the land - was considered bad luck. To bring good luck, fishermen needed to eat fish from the head to the tail, shed a few drops of blood before a trip in an accident or a fight, or even (on Scottish boats), throw a crewman overboard and haul him back, so that the fish would follow.