

## Culling seals is wrong

### Birds I View

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Harp seal and pup on ice at the Front off northeast Newfoundland.  
(photo: Dave McKinnon)

Last week I was visiting my 95 year old father-in-law Tom Dalton at the Health Sciences Centre. I watched his eyes light up as he smiled like a young boy when my sister-in-law and partner delivered a meal of cod tongues – a tasty change from Health Science fare.

I knew there was something to offer. I prepared Tom a meal of seal with the fixings. The seal had been shot during the hunt by the crew aboard the *Lady Easton II* – a crew and vessel that has been taking me, my students, son and colleagues to Funk Island for over 20 years. It's a family affair.

The seal was prepared by Skipper Edison Easton of Carmanville. It was magnificent. I want more. I gave Tom most of mine.

### The Grey Seal Cull

Ignoring independent and DFO scientific advice that culling seals could have unpredictable effects and possibly negatively influence cod recovery, the Canadian Senate Fishing Committee chaired by Fabian Manning approved a cull of 70,000 or 70% of the grey seals in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence.

In testimony before the committee, Jeff Hutchings of Dalhousie University pointed out the flawed political logic that over-rides scientific evidence in calling for a cull. "One cannot credibly predict from a science perspective whether a cull ... would have a positive ... or negative impact on cod ... or no impact whatsoever."

The consumption of cod by grey seals is likely less than 10% of their diet. It does not difficult to realize that such a minor dietary component is extremely unlikely to bear any direct influence on cod. Beyond this is the reality that these animals are embedded in a complex multi-species food web involving much more than a simple interaction between one predator and one prey.

Scientific concerns surrounding culls are not specific to grey seals. Research by DFO and Memorial University Ph.D. student Alejandro Buren indicates that northern cod biomass is influenced by fishing and by capelin not by seals. Yet, we continue to fish the large egg-bearing capelin and focus on culling seals?

As Jeff Hutchings indicated there can be no sound recovery plan for cod in the until quantifiable recovery targets are established and assessed. There are no recovery targets only conjecture, crisis management and culling.

Fisheries Minister Keith Ashfield noted "seals aren't vegetarians ... they eat fish." They always have. Hence the logical question, because seals eat cod doesn't culling them benefit cod? The answer is simple but difficult – complexity.

The web of predators and prey involves many interactions not just those of minor consumers of cod like seals. In the ocean's ecological network, the indirect interactions are not easily predictable though they are frequently the most powerful ones in shifting outcomes. No matter how we may try to "dumb it down", it is not constructive. Lots of animals eat cod, including cod themselves.

### **We cannot "balance" the ecosystem**

It is neither in our interest nor within our capability to "balance" the ecosystem. What on earth and ocean does "balancing" the ecosystem mean anyway? This is more of a religious fallacy than a credible ecological occurrence. The ecosystem has a range of tolerances yet is a dynamic ecological process often influenced by climate. Ecosystems change over time. They are not static entities that require "balance".

Yet, "balancing the ecosystem" is the fundamental rationalization for culling. "There are too many seals and we must restore the balance." Not so.

## **There are not too many seals**

There are not too many seals. There are simply the number of seals that there is. The more there are – the more we can hunt sustainably. That needs to be our focus.

When the population exceeds its food and other environmental supports, it will decline. This is a simple relationship in population ecology.

Harp seals depend on Arctic pack ice as a birthing platform. Anyone who does not account for rapidly decreasing Arctic ice in thinking about future population projections of harp seals ignores the obvious.

## **The seal hunt should not be justified by culling**

I cannot recall hearing anyone, particularly the Head of the Canadian Sealers Association, talk about the seal hunt without claiming there are too many seals and it is good to kill lots of them. Bunk.

This pervasive disdainful perspective of seals is indeed the greatest threat to the hunt. There is need for reverence in taking an animal from the natural environment. How could it be any other way? It is logical, beneficial and sustainable to support the seal hunt while rejecting the cull.

Sanitizing a cull by contending that we are simply “removing” seals is inappropriate. Shooting tens of thousands of animals to sink and rot is something else. Did we just “remove” great auks, right whales and northern cod or did we slaughter them through over-harvesting and corporate greed? Putting a fine point on it might add some clarity.

## **So why a cull?**

So we can impose blame and shift responsibility rather than assume it. It is too easy and irresponsible to put the sins of the fishery where they do not belong and vilify seals and foreigners.

Along with establishment of the Canadian 200 mile limit in 1977, governmental policies permitted the “removal” of northern cod culminating in the moratorium. Fisheries scientists were not allowed to speak out because they worked for the minister not the people.

So what can we do? Eat seal. It is a delicious unadulterated healthy omega 3 meat from a clean ocean. Seal is preferable to chemically enhanced, at times contaminated beef from mega-shops in Alberta. Take seal oil capsules. Wear the mitts, boots and clothing – it’s real.

There are many seals. These magnificent animals can provide a valuable renewal resource – let’s quit dragging it down.

## **Birds sightings**

Flocks of Canada geese are in Torbay (Linda Reddy) and Hodges Cove Trinity Bay (Max Smith). Goldeneye flocks have been on Mitchell's Pond (Dick Whitaker) and Neary's Pond (Carolyn Mayo).

In Portugal Cove, Alison and Ian Harvey found a juvenile northern goshawk protecting its bounty from crows. Alison captured a stunning photo of the hawk flying off with a ruffed grouse. Another ruffed grouse that struck a window in Hodges Cove was delivered to me by Doris and Max Smith.

A beautiful male belted kingfisher with a broken wing that was found in Wedgewood Park by Lynn Holwell died in my care. On Ramea, Richard Northcott saw a killdeer and a common nighthawk on 4 November and a catbird on 29 October.

In Portugal Cove, ravens are visiting Cathy White's deck and on King's Road, Chantelle Burke sighted a streak-breasted immature flicker. Known for versatility and catholic diets, crows have been exploring piles of moose droppings and flying with a McDonald's happy meal bag – interesting combo (Kathryn Welbourne). Atop Gray Man's Beard, Myles Whitaker saw a rare barn swallow.

From St. Philips, Ken LeDez reports close encounters with an apparent great horned owl that swooped and struck his golden retriever. The dog was not injured though the owl's talons ruffled its fur. The owl may have been protecting a kill that the dog came upon.

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