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Fishes are something much more than raw material

Birds I View

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Northern wheatear in Torbay during October (photo: Gene Herzberg)

I had a gut reaction the first time I heard it. And every time since, it elicits discomfort.

Perhaps, it was a Fisheries Products International CEO's utterance that referred to fishes as "raw material". Nothing could be further from the truth. This is the talk of fish barons. Yet the reference of fishes as raw material has become common parlance among fishers, Fisheries Broadcast announcers and as might be expected fish processors.

I recall many instances at docksides offering to buy a fish from a fisherman, when I've always gotten that ever generous and endearing around the bay response – “Here boy take it, it's just a fish.” Just a fish - but what an incredible gift – a wild fish caught in the depths of North Atlantic.

Incidentally as archaic as it sounds, it is actually illegal to buy a fish from a fisherman at dockside in Newfoundland. This circumstance too reflects the processor-biased treatment of one of our most valuable renewable natural resources as raw material and is an outgrowth of the fish merchant controls of the past.

Stereotypic labels are often assimilated in everyday speech, but referring to fishes as raw material taken on a life of its own. Why are natural resources considered as raw material? The term raw material is a creation of the 18th century industrial revolution invoked by European manufacturers and bankers in their exploitation of the natural resources of the South America, Asia and Africa. The raw materials were mined, cut down and overharvested by the natives and shipped at bare bones prices to the profiteering business brigades in European capitals. Among other things, raw materials included precious metals, spices, logs, rubber, oil, fishes and even the natives themselves as slaves.

In economic considerations, raw material gains high end value after processing, manufacturing or refining into something else that has high consumer demand, e.g. filets from whole fishes. Yet to consider fishes raw material across the economic divide between the fisherman and the processor is a risky business. The big danger is that the value of unprocessed raw material is essentially its rate of extraction, and it is obvious where that strategy leads.

The most obvious and blatant examples of fisheries extractions are the large scale industrial ventures that vacuum forage fish like capelin, sandlance, sardines and menhaden from ocean as rapidly as possible. The raw material is then rendered and reduced to oils for animal foods, lubricants and the like. The money generates from the quantity not the quality of the fishes and on a per capita basis it ain't much.

Surely it is more environmentally and economically sane from a fishing perspective not to treat natural resources this way. Such a counter-productive approach with renewable resources such Atlantic cod, snow crab or shrimp will reap minimal benefit and limit conservation approaches.

Shipping fishes as raw material to distant shores for processing exacerbates these problems.

All fishes are not the same. Live caught hand-lined and pot caught cod are more valuable to consumers than offshore gill-netted fish that may have remained in the net for days before harvesting. On the wharf in Bergen Norway, live cod are displayed in tanks from which buyers select the fishes they want before they are killed.

Extraction is not the way to treat a renewal natural resource. Extraction is not a viable fishery strategy, and a fish is something much more valuable than the term raw material implies.

Shipping fishes in bulk to China or elsewhere for processing is not the way to a sustainable fishery. It's time to fish, cut bait and bring the fishes to shore.

Birds in area and around province

The outflow by the Corner Brook mill often attracts lots of ducks. On 13 October, 125 greater and at least 1 lesser scaup were on site with some black ducks and gulls. Canada geese are now common residents in the Carmanville area. In late October, Edison Easton counted 37 geese, a half dozen black ducks and some mallards in Noggin Cove. Ed says this would have never been the case 20 years ago – the waterfowl would have been in the pot or the freezer. Things change.

A few lingering gannets were foraging along the Straight Shore of Bonavista Bay in early November, and the last yellowlegs that have delayed their migration to pampas of Argentina are still scattered about the island.

Torbay has been a Mecca of rare bird excitement. Following the “discovery” of a juvenile yellow-crowned night heron that has taken up temporary residence, a rare scissors-tail flycatcher and a wheatear have also been keeping town residents and visiting birders very excited.

In early October a juvenile northern goshawk crashed into a window at Chris Baird's house in near the east end of Windsor Lake. Chris housed the stunned bird in a cage on his deck overnight. On release the next morning the hawk took flight and following a crash in the woods seemed to get back on course.

A ruffed grouse has been an enjoyable visitor to our property. In mid-October early flocks of robins arrived in the area, signaling the onset of the fall dogberry fest.

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