

Ocean protection will benefit Newfoundland and Labrador

Birds I View

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Provincial Ecological Reserves that protect significant breeding communities of seabirds.

Newfoundland culture is deeply embedded in the ocean around us, though globally our fishery is now best known for the decimation of the once magnificent northern cod stocks. With a marine culture nurtured in a rich fabric of coastal communities, why is so little of the ocean protected?

During the decades following the 1992 ground-fishery closure, there has been little or no fishing for cod on the Grand Bank. Never has there been a better time in Newfoundland's history for setting aside Marine Protected Areas [MPAs] such as on the Southeast Shoal to aid in the rebuilding of cod and capelin stocks. Though nothing of the sort has happened or even been considered seriously. The lack of leadership from fishers, processors, the FFAW, politicians and the general public is an unwhispered deafening silence.

Protected areas can aid greatly in allowing fish stock recovery and population resilience. Note the rebounding of New England haddock following 9600 square km closure on George's Bank in 1994 [<http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/fm-gp/sustainable-durable/fisheries-peches/haddock-aiglefin-eng.htm>]. The haddock stock biomass rebounded from 10,000 tonnes in 1993 to 250,000 tonnes today, benefiting both US and Nova Scotian fishers.

Corporate trawlers and inshore fishers

The excessive blaming of foreign fishing for the demise of northern cod fails to recognize the telling fact that Canada gave these quotas to foreign countries for other trade privileges, for example fish quotas to Russia in exchange for wheat. And there can be no overlooking the obvious. In 1977 when all foreign fishing was prohibited within the 200 mile Canadian Economic Exclusion Zone, there was a robust stock of northern cod on the Grand Bank. From that time until the final collapse a mere decade later, the over-fishing was not foreign but local.

The ultimate destruction, the killer spike was hammered in by Fishery Products International (FPI) and National Sea Products – locally groomed and subsidized dragger-based stock destroyers. With so much blame directed at foreigners and seals, a home-grown responsible accounting never materialized.

Throughout the moratorium, the fishery in Placentia Bay provided a shining light of hope. Yet despite vociferous protests by inshore fishers, Ocean Choice International is permitted to drag through the local spawning aggregations. DFO characterizes this trawling as a scientific exercise, sounding something like the Japanese “whaling science” being run in the Antarctic.

One cannot escape the conclusion that if marine conservation was in the hands of fishers rather than in corporate boardrooms with their powerful government lobbying, the marine environment and the Newfoundland workforce could be in better stead.

Protecting breeding aggregations

To try to find out why so little attention has been paid to the potential of MPAs, I asked some inshore fishermen. Their answers include – fishers would never agree to “no-take” areas; fish stocks have always fluctuated widely over time; and distrust of government.

These difficult issues would require considerable effort to surmount, but they are surmountable. The discussions with fishers also identified a key conservation consideration that is also a focal concern of fish biologists – the protection of spawning aggregations.

It's not just about fish

MPAs are not just about fish. Their intent as indicated in the International Convention Biological Diversity, to which Canada is a signatory, is to preserve marine biodiversity and unimpeded ocean ecosystem processes. Biodiversity includes corals, plankton, birds, mammals, turtles, fishes and all other marine animals and plants.

Two provincial MPAs are designated. In Eastport, a tiny 2.1 square km reserve is focused on lobster, and in Gilbert Bay a 60 square km reserve is focused on red cod. These useful MPAs are miniscule in the ocean scale of things.

Terrestrial protected areas

The values of protected areas can be much easier to appreciate on land. Reserves like Gros Morne National Park overwhelm us with their awe-inspiring landforms and diversity of life.

National parks are “no-take” reserves in which extraction activities are prohibited. We accept that forestry and hunting are not allowed, though the initial reactions to these restrictions were intensely negative. Over time, we have realized the profound benefits of these protected areas for our sense of place, well-being and for the preservation of biodiversity and wonder.

Like foresters in the terrestrial environment, fishers and corporate harvesters represent only some of the ocean stakeholders. Protected areas whether on land or in the ocean belong to all citizens, and all citizens have a stake and a say in their creation. Marine protected areas are environmental archives of the diversity of ocean life and ecosystem processes that are essential for our understanding of something as simply profound as life on earth.

Seabird Ecological Reserves

The closest thing that we have to a provincial network of MPAs are the provincial Seabird Ecological Reserves. These island and land-based reserves carry no ocean protection whatsoever, but they do, as has been shown to be important for fish stocks, protect breeding aggregations.

The results are striking. The Funk Island Ecological Reserve, for example, provides breeding habitat for the world’s largest population of common murre, a major colony of gannets and 7 other seabird species. Prior to protection in the previous century, Funk Island was a barren oceanic rock virtually devoid of birds.

Protecting seabird breeding aggregations has aided the growth and resilience of their populations. Protecting ground-fish spawning aggregations has likewise resulted in stock growth.

It’s past time to set aside areas on the Grand Bank as reserves and ecological archives to allow multitudes of marine animals including fish to prosper for perpetuity.

Lawn Bay Ecological Reserve

The provincial government officially established the Lawn Bay Ecological Reserve off the heel of the Burin Peninsula in Placentia Bay. The 3-island reserve protects the nesting habitat of 7 nesting seabird species, primary of which are Leach’s storm-petrels and Manx shearwaters.

A compelling aspect of the Lawn Bay Ecological Reserve is its location at the western side of the mouth of Placentia Bay. With Cape St. Mary’s on the eastern side, there are now two seabird reserves in commanding positions on the entrance to our most industrialized bay with the most oil tanker traffic.

Seabirds are usually the first indicators of oil and ocean pollution, and we are now in a much improved situation to keep watch over that far greater bay.

Birds in the area

Gannets exhibit range of foraging skills and dietary breadth. At the end of May, gannets were foraging with cormorants among the iceberg mountains off Anchor Brook on the NE coast. They may have been chasing sea-run trout returning to the river or herring. At another extreme, gannets on the Grand Bank were diving among fulmars around crab boats scavenging for 3-day old discarded squid bait – yummy [Wayne Ledwell].

Rick West photographed the magnificence of a brilliant great egret in the Virginia River near Logy Bay Road [<http://www.seeitnow.ca/birds/8june15slides>]. Long-tailed ducks were just off the rocks in Portugal Cove in early May, and in early June, a stunning male northern shoveler was among the black ducks in the Clarenville inlet. Another pair of shovelers was seen in Gander where 2 pairs of hooded mergansers were also sighted [John Gosse].

Razorbills were diving along the Straight Shore of Bonavista Bay in from the Penguin Islands where their extinct flightless cousins once bred.

An immature bald eagle was harassing and being harassed by crows and gulls below Gray Man's Beard above the ferry landing in Portugal Cove in late May. All ended peacefully as the birds parted ways. On 1 June, a ruffed grouse in cherry tree was seen near the Western Gully wetland [Janet Montevecchi].

An eastern kingbird on a cemetery fence in Musgrave Harbour was a welcomed mid-May surprise. Twenty-five cedar waxwings and 6 American goldfinches were feeding on apple blossoms in Humber Valley in early June – as they do every year [Nick Montevecchi].