

Fishing to commercial extinction
Birds I View
Bill Montevecchi



A gannet diving for capelin – a key food for cod, birds, whales and seals. It doesn't make any sense to fish the big mothers. (Photo by Rick West)

If one wanted to identify the fishing strategy used in Newfoundland and Labrador, “fishing to commercial extinction” would pretty much hit the nail on the head. It's a long-standing tradition that started more than five centuries ago when Basque whalers in southern Labrador moved to the Northern Peninsula as they decimated stocks along the way.

In the late 1700s, the last flightless bird of the northern hemisphere, the Great Auk was laid to waste at the species' largest colony on Funk Island where they were like whales slaughtered to commercial extinction.

New dragger technology ramped up over-harvesting potential. The robust haddock stock off southern Newfoundland during the 1950s and 1960s with a bit of fishing restraint could be thriving today but instead owing to a rapacious unsustainable dragger onslaught is nothing more than a faded historical note.

And there is the northern cod – the species for which too little responsibly has been accepted and too much blame cast upon foreigners and seals. When the northern cod fishery was closed in the early 1990s and cod were deemed endangered, politicians of all stripes and fishers lamented and protested, but only a champion of the corporate dragger pillage, the venerated Vic Young, had the clarity to say “there aren't any fish out there”. And that and that fact alone is why Canadian “conservation measures” were invoked. The science was mired,

pressured, filtered and simply lost in the machinations of political expediency and corporate greed.

What's next? Shrimp biomass appears to be on a commercial extinction pathway reminiscent of northern cod but fishers demand more quota. While the inshore sector has won concessions over the offshore dragger fleet which in and of itself seems a positive sign, there is little sign of restraint on the part of inshore fishers. And if and when the shrimp stock crashes will they blame government for giving them too much of what they demanded?

Moving from raw material extraction to live fish harvesting

The issue is about valuation. Fishes are often sickeningly referred to as raw material. This menial designation devalues a wild animal harvest to a dimensionless commodity whose only worth is the rate at which it can be extracted from the sea. Sustainable fisheries cannot be created from raw material extraction but only from fisheries that harvest fresh fishes from a clean ocean.

Extracting raw material from the sea and fishing to commercial extinction prevent sustainable wealth that could benefit our communities, province and country enormously in perpetuity. Sustainable benefits could be so profitable that there would be no need to sell out the earth's last wildlife harvests for destructive open-sea aquaculture.

Contrary to spin, aquaculture does not produce more food for a hungry planet. It takes more fish and protein to grow a farmed salmon than it yields. Even without factoring in the die-offs and the escapes that generate continual wild salmon carnage, farming salmon creates a net loss of food production. Through provincial and federal government sell-outs we subsidize the destruction of wild fishes and ocean habitat.

The destructiveness of salmon farming struck home in Bonne Bay on the west coast during a fine spring day in 2015. In astonishment, I watched as purse-seiner after purse seiner docked and vacuum-pumped magnificent herring into fish boxes being fork-lifted onto a line-up of refrigerated trailer-trucks continually throughout the day.

The loaded trucks were driven 500 km across the island to the Beothuk Fish Plant in Valleyfield to be rendered down for aquaculture and mink food. This is food destruction not production.

With approval [sans EIS!] of the Greig mega-open-sea aquaculture demise of Placentia Bay, the provincial and federal governments are subsidizing enormous antibiotic and pesticide regimes required to hold thousands of farmed salmon in crowded open-sea pens. Greig can't get it right in Norway so they bring their designs here, and like a third world banana republic Newfoundland and Labrador buys in hook, line and sucker with a \$50 million dollar donation. This give-away to aquaculture destruction is a direct consequence of the devaluation of the capture fishery and lack of a long-term sustainable strategy.

Moving from raw material extraction to sustainable fishing would make more money by catching fewer higher quality fish. Fish caught live on hand-lines and in cod pots command higher prices than dead ones pulled from gillnets. On a recent visit to Ottawa it great to see “hand-lined cod from Fogo Island” on the menu of a fine restaurant. This surely is more sustainable and profitable for more people than shipping tonnages of frozen cod block to China for processing.

To be fair, over-fishing is a not peculiar to our province – it’s a global problem. It’s an international problem exacerbated by global trade-agreements that benefit corporate excesses not harvesters. Local harvesting, processing and production are the backbone of a robust economy. And even with so many fishers exiting and only a few younger people recruiting in, there are survivors in our coastal communities – third, fourth and fifth generation fishers who deserve all the support we can give them – enjoy local fishes caught in the sea around us.

Dead finches and *Trichomonas*

Trichomonas, a highly contagious bird parasite, is transmitted among birds at feeders and bird-baths. Dead seed-eating finches are being found across the island. Pine siskins have been picked up in Portugal Cove [Sue Willis] and St. John’s [Christina Bourne]. Prevention of transmission involves cleaning bird feeders and bird baths.

More basically, it makes no sense to use bird feeders in summer when birds have sufficient natural food and when harmful bacteria and diseases can be fostered in warm temperatures. Summer is the time to take down bird feeders and clean them for winter use.

Friendly young starling

A spunky little starling was befriending people and flitting in Whaleback Convenience in Portugal Cove when Colleen Rogers called last week. The recently out-of-the-nest fledging was caught by Randy Burry and passed to me.

The star spent a day in our house and a night in our greenhouse before flying the coup. The young bird had been given tender-loving care at the Ferry Last Stop Café and was fully imprinted on and attracted to humans. The tiny starlet follows people often perching on a shoulder arm or head and is easy to hand feed. Please inform me of any encounters.

Birds in the area

In early July, Tors Cove Pond on the Southern Shore Highway was rich with ring-necked ducks. Six males and 2 or 3 broods with 18 duckling and tending hens were seen in a quick scan.

On 10 July a parasitic jaeger was dogging a common tern trying to steal a meal in a dramatic chase just off the East Coast Trail in Cappahayden.

In mid-July Kathryn Welbourn photographed great-horned owlets near Sunshine Park in St. Philips. A merlin was likely looking for shorebirds as it streaked the coastline near Pico's Point by the East Coast Trail in Portugal Cove on 7 August.

Lastly – a thank you to the PCSP council for installing a concrete barrier limiting truck, car and ATV access to the Beach Cove Mountain trails.

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