

Open letter to seabird biologists in the Falkland Islands
Birds I View
Bill Montevecchi



The Magellanic oystercatcher is a common shorebird in the Falkland Islands
[photo – Bill Montevecchi]

Having a bit of experience in the Falkland Islands, I had opportunity to join with a group of experts to engage in an exercise regarding seabird distributions in this biologically rich area. The reason for the exercise is that offshore oil exploration is starting, and efforts are being made to reduce conflicts with seabirds. The workshops and subsequent work created some impressive maps that documented what is known and indicated research gaps that need to be filled.

This information will be used in marine spatial planning exercises to identify biologically rich areas that are sensitive to development and that might be zoned for safe-guarding from oil development, fishing, tourism and shipping. The current information needs to integrate human activity sites and distributions that can be overlaid with the bird distributions in a risk analysis to identify areas of potential conflict.

Though beyond this useful exercise, there is the immediate threat of seabirds being attracted to brilliantly lit drill-rigs that work the area. As we in eastern Canada have had considerable experience with this threat during two decades that oil development has been ongoing, I wrote to colleagues working in the Falkland Island to apprise them of our experiences.

Dear Colleagues:

With regard to human activity, the issue of light attraction and mortality of seabirds at drill rigs and other offshore platforms warrants serious consideration at the outset of development. Based on the best evidence available, we know that the aggregations of seabirds around platforms are episodic often associated with foggy conditions, migratory periods and young birds of the year. As well, it appears that nocturnally foraging/fledging petrels and shearwaters may well be the most sensitive birds to light attraction at sea.

In the NW Atlantic, the species most commonly reported on platforms and most vulnerable is the Leach's Storm-Petrel. Dr. April Hedd with Environment Canada has tracks of these birds foraging near platforms and moving in the area during migration.

Working with the regulator and oil companies at the very outset of production in the NW Atlantic, we prepared some simple yet robust protocols to monitor seabird occurrences at drill rigs and platforms. However despite repeated public hearing presentations, formal requests, etc., after 20 years of oil production and exploration on the Grand Banks, nothing has ever been done to address this issue or to allow independent observers on platforms and rigs to do so.

For there to be any realistic possibility for things to be different in the Falkland Islands marine area, initiatives and actions need to be taken immediately. Keeping independent observers off platforms and avoiding scientifically robust monitoring protocols is a corporate strategy. In Canada, the strategy is supported by a complicit regulator – the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board [C-NLOBP] that is conflicted and structurally biased to oil corporation development rather than to the conservation of marine animals.

The general approach is a “Type II error” tactic that works on the general perspective that no information tends to be inferred as no problem. Now after 2 decades of operation, the oil companies have no scientifically defensible data of the occurrences of seabirds or any marine animals at platforms.

Why is this of concern? The populations of the vulnerable Leach's Storm-Petrels have plummeted by about 40 - 50 % or more during the 20 years of oil development in eastern Canada with no known cause. The Canadian Wildlife Service is studying the potential involvement of mercury body burdens and effects from winter diets. The critical missing piece of information is mortality [flaring, oiling, collisions] at offshore oil platforms. There is no credible data to assess this, and there isn't going to be.

Here's a numeric qualification of the population decreases. The Bacallieu Island Seabird Ecological Reserve is home the largest colony of Leach's Storm-Petrels in the world. Our

population estimates have been in the order of 3.3 million pairs – that is 6.6 million individuals and with chicks about 10 million birds. The most recent estimate is 2.02 million pairs or a loss of 2,560,000 birds not counting chicks. Likewise on Great Island in the Witless Bay Seabird Ecological Reserve the previous population of 250,000 pairs with chicks was well over 500,000 individuals and is estimated to have decreased by 55% [loss of 231,722 birds] The combined losses involve an estimated 2,791,722 birds [not counting chicks] or 17 – 22 % of the estimated species' world population.

In view of the existing evidence and taking a precautionary approach, what can we do? In the first instance, we could lobby/pressure the Falkland Islands Government to insist that independent wildlife observers with standard robust observation protocols are required on platforms as a condition of oil company exploration and operation. Whether or not the government is successful in such a venture, there would at least be a positive and clear initiative at the outset of development. Otherwise complicity will be *modus operandi* as it is worldwide.

And this is indeed a global problem. Following the *Deepwater Horizon* blowout in the Gulf of Mexico, the pollution was ongoing for months, owing to engineering failures of the blowout preventer and the blowout preventer backup. Why? According to US President Barack Obama, it was due to a “scandalously close relationship between the regulator and the industry.” This is the situation in Canada. What President Obama did to resolve the problem was to partition responsibilities for economic development from environment and safety to remove some of the inherent structural conflicts in the regulatory process. We have not done this in Canada.

If unsuccessful with such efforts in the Falkland Islands, we should be prepared to bear witness to the deadly and lamentable consequences of inadequate offshore regulation as many of us in Canada are doing now.

Yours sincerely,

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cc: Hon. Katherine McKenna, Minister
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