

Political fishing quotas create social chaos

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi

The provincial government and the Barry Group are negotiating a possible 50,000 tonne quota of offshore capelin for Harbour Breton. The fish targeted are in NAFO fishing areas 3 NO on the Grand Bank. Let's put this proposition in the context of the ecological importance of capelin and recent indications about the state of capelin in NW Atlantic.

Capelin is the primary forage fish for all large marine animals in the Newfoundland and Labrador region. Cod, other ground-fish, salmon, char, seabirds, seals and whales depend on capelin. What happens to capelin essentially determines the food supply for all large animals in the NW Atlantic.

As apparent to everyone in coastal Newfoundland and Labrador, capelin are in a radically altered state. Since an unprecedented cold water year in 1991, only small numbers of small capelin have been spawning on the beaches later in the summer.

The few DFO offshore surveys that have been conducted for capelin cannot find them in abundances present before 1990. Spring and fall surveys have found that capelin are nearer the bottom and in deeper water since the 1980s.

Paradoxically, the scarcity of spawning capelin on beaches and changes in their ecology occurred after cod, their major predator, had been eradicated from the offshore by over-fishing. Cod consumed millions of tonnes of capelin in the 1980s. So with the cod gone, shouldn't we be up to our necks in capelin?

Could it be that the 40,000 tonne annual inshore quotas have interacted with the cold water perturbation to delay the inshore migration of those large early spawning fishes? What is the impact of a fishery directed at the next generation by targeting egg-bearing females?

We don't have answers to these questions, but in fact we don't need all the answers to engage the obvious. A 50,000 tonne capelin quota is scientifically indefensible.

Precautionary and ecosystem-based approaches to fishing are essential.

In expressions of concerns about precautionary approaches, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has written: "...extra care should be taken to ensure important fodder species ... like capelin ... which are used intensively by top predators ... are not reduced below historically average values" (www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/csas/status/3004/hsr2004_001_e.pdf).

The consequences of ignoring precautionary principles in fishing capelin are evident. Recall the large offshore capelin fishery prosecuted by the Russians in the Labrador Sea in area 2J during the late 1970s. Today, 30 years later, there is little sign of significant recovery of these vitally important capelin off Labrador.

The most recent scientific assessment for capelin for areas 3 NO, the area proposed for the new offshore quota, is from North Atlantic Fisheries Organization (www.nafo.ca/fisheries/fishery/species/capelin.html). Here is some of what's reported – "Recent Assessment (2005): Since 1994, capelin biomass has remained at a low level compared to the late 1980s. Scientific Council recommends no directed fishery on capelin in Div. 3NO in 2006-2007. ... Capelin stock in Div. 3NO remains in a depressive state."

One might question if science is only about saying "no"? Again, the consequences of ignoring precautionary fishing strategies are manifest. Witness the depopulating of the coastal communities of Newfoundland and Labrador. Perhaps saying "no" to ever-ratcheted up fishing quotas in the past could have helped. More importantly, saying "no" now represents a positive step toward proactive, long-term strategic planning. Saying "yes" is crisis management created by saying "yes" too many times in the past.

Bill Barry has indicated the wild fishery can now support aquaculture fish. Indeed the wild fishery is being threatened by this proposal.

The wild capture fishery is the province's most basic source of potential long-term, sustainable wealth. Too many interests are all too ready to write it off for the sake of aquaculture.

Sound long-term ecological investment is needed. The investment is unfished capelin. These forage fish help sustain what little is left of the cod stocks. Capelin also support the whales and seabirds that drive much of our ecotourism industry. Seals that provide harvests for many fishers also feed on capelin. Capelin nurture the marine food

web that sustains us. The real value of capelin is accrued through those that are left in the water to feed ground fish, seals, whales and seabirds. The value of capelin is squandered by shipping pregnant females to Japan and by grinding them into fishmeal for farmed salmon.

Banding gulls at Robin Hood Bay

On a cold, windy sunny Sunday morning in mid-February, Greg Robertson and Pierre Ryan of the Canadian Wildlife Service and Dave Fifield of Memorial University led a class of graduate students in the art of bird-banding in the fine gull habitat of Robin Hood Bay. We had to choose our banding site carefully because when we arrived, a prime garbage area was occupied by Bruce Mactavish, John Wells, Ken Knowles and Paul Linegar who were searching for the rare and elusive slaty-backed gull from the western Pacific Ocean.

We laid out rubber mats with open slide loops of fishing line and covered them with bread. Initially, the gulls were wary but soon dense frenzied feeding flocks piled on the bread.

The gulls were savage in their efforts to secure a bit of low nutritive white bread. But among fetid heaps at the dump, the bread was a treat. Every so often when a gull was noosed around the leg, we quickly grabbed it, measured its bill, wing and leg, banded and released it.

Eighteen herring gulls, 14 greater black-backed gulls and 3 glaucous gulls were captured. Judging from the light weights of the gulls, my impression is that during winter they live on the verge of starvation. Under such circumstances nothing, including survival, is certain. Your foe and your friend are one in the same, and the moment and garbage scrap is the measure of existence.

Birds in the area and around the province

Lester Rees photographed a female canvasback loitering with a male American wigeon in Spaniards Bay.

An immature bald eagle was killed in a snare set for a coyote in Fermeuse (Wayne Ledwell). Snares such horrible non-specific and inhumane killing (not always quickly or painlessly) devices.

Boreal owls projecting their hollow whistling hoots in Terra Nova National Park (Greg Stroud) and elsewhere.

A brown thrasher is reported at B. Goodyear's feeder in Lumsden! An early horned lark has been spotted in Trepassey (Dave Sheppard).

Five red crossbills are at Gerry Campbell's feeder in Port Blandford, where there are good cone crops and few red squirrels (Greg Stroud). Forty or more common redpolls are visiting Lester Rees's feeders in Whitbourne.

Waxwings and robins are flitting about seeking over-wintered berries in St. John's and about the Avalon Peninsula (John Lewis, Nick Montevecchi). A rare varied thrush has been dining at Joe Hyne's feeder in Renewals.

Seen any interesting birds? Got any questions? Email mont@mun.ca.
Phone = 895-2901.

