

Can economic analyses help protect the environment?

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Rare and endangered Piping Plovers nest on the sandy beaches of southwestern Newfoundland. (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

With the demise of Stephan Dion and with the rise of the Williams' government, environmental issues are clearly off the political and public agendas. I am fortunate to be employed in the Ivory Tower where a diversity of ideas are exchanged and challenged. In many ways, the process is similar to what happens on CBC Radio's Fisheries Broadcast.

Recent email discussions about economic accounting of environmental features have helped me better understand some issues. At the same time they have sharpened my skepticism of such approaches.

Ecological economists propose that we engage accounting analyses that put monetary values on the different environmental services such as clean air and water that promote health but that we take for granted. Because environmental benefits are compromised by industrial developments that generate money and jobs, such a cost-benefit accounting could better enable us (and politicians) to make practical, sustainable decisions about developments. This sounds straight-forward enough.

What makes such an exercise so difficult is that indeed everyone wants jobs and money. These immediate needs obscure longer-term investments in environmental health. Hence benefits shown by ecological economics that would preclude or modify developmental proposals will take a back seat to cash on the table. These accounting exercises could be worthwhile though in helping to raise awareness

about environmental abuse as opposed to just reacting to it after the fact, as was done with the cod moratorium.

There have been proactive influences of economic analysis. For example in the 1990s, identification of the potential gains from recreational Atlantic salmon fishing was a factor in the federal government's decision to close the commercial fishery. Yet even with this value-added perspective of sport fishing, Atlantic salmon populations have not recovered in the absence of commercial fishing mortality. Risks to Atlantic salmon populations are also increasing by economically driven and governmentally subsidized aquaculture ventures. Major destruction and disturbance of essential spawning river habitat in Labrador and Newfoundland are ongoing, and we hear of presumptuously termed "green" arguments for small hydro developments in the absence large scale river-use and land-use planning.

Where is it all going? Environmentalists are often targeted as being anti-development. Yet developers are rarely referred to as being anti-environmental or anti-societal, which they clearly can be, as the recent actions of Abitibi in central Newfoundland show.

In Long Harbour, the Williams' government and DFO are collaborating to allow Vale Inco to turn Sandy Pond into a poisoned toxic waste bath. Yet this destruction is not necessary for the project to proceed, it is just cheaper to destroy natural habitat than to be responsible for the toxic waste that the development will create. A fair bit of it will also go into Placentia Bay.

Vale Inco used a very questionable ecosystem analysis to make the decision to destroy Sandy Pond rather than construct an expensive artificial tailings pond. If you find this unnecessary environmental destruction to be an unacceptable aspect of development, the mayor of Placentia will derogatively refer to you a "do-gooder". We clearly need more do-goers to affirm basic environmental and human-rights, and to guard thee Newfoundland.

Cape Ray

On a recent drive back across the island, my wife Janet and I stopped for an early morning boil-up at Cape Ray just north Port aux Basque. I have always been attracted to Cape Ray as were the Dorsets many centuries ago.

Cape Ray is wildlife hotspot. Les Tuck used to look for landbirds that hit the lighthouse during fall migrations. In the past, Ian Goudie, Tony Gaston and I witnessed tens of thousands of scoters moving northward during spring. I was with John Wells and Bruce Mactavish, when I experienced my first catbird in Newfoundland – one that was calling persistently as if it were nesting.

On 12 May, flocks of eider rafted along the nearshore tidal upwelling, and other seaducks were dispersed throughout the area. Double-crested and great cormorants were flocking to the south and north, and gannets likely from the large colony on Great Bird Rock in the Magdalen Islands foraged along the coast.

We also saw a gray seal and a flock of grackles that included a brown-headed cowbird. What a perfect and refreshing context for fresh espresso and hard-boiled eggs. Priceless and free.

Birds in the area and around the province

Northern pintail ducks are nesting in the bog at the intersection of Portugal Cove Road Old Broad Cove Road and possibly near Murray's Pond also (Carolyn Seeley-Mayo). On 25 April, I had my

first spring sighting of an osprey that was flying toward Windsor Lake from Round Pond. Ring-billed gulls with florescent green wing tags are showing up in Lewisporte (Paul Langdon, Sabina Wilhelm). The tagged gulls are part of study of the movements of gulls wintering in Massachusetts.

A number of tagged gulls from Massachusetts showed up in Newfoundland last year, and it is likely that more will again this year. Sightings should be reported to the Canadian Wildlife Service (772-5585).

As always, my friend Richard Northcott from Ramea has interesting sightings. A great egret was at Ramea at the end of April.

Western Newfoundland Birding Festival

From 24 – 31 May, there will be a fantastic bird and cultural festival in southwestern Newfoundland in the Codroy Valley, on the Port au Port Peninsula and right around the coast to Rose Blanche. There will bird trips, lectures, boat tours, lobster dinners, music, plays, reading and parties with activities geared to all ages and family participation.

The Nature Conservancy of Canada has protected some fantastic properties on Sandy Point Island and in Codroy Valley at The Hermitage where there will be bird tours. On Saturday 23 May, Darroch Whitaker will be giving a presentation on forest birds at the Wetlands Interpretation Center in Codroy Valley.

On 24 – 26 May, I will be helping with some of the boat tours running out of the Port au Port Peninsula where my daughter Marina and I will also be giving some school presentations on birds and habitat protection. Boat tour info can be obtained from the Inn at the Cape in Cape St. George (1-888-484-4740).

If you have the opportunity, a trip to the southwestern area of the island when our provincial bird diversity is at its highest can be a very rewarding natural and cultural experience. You can even enjoy a priceless boil-up at Cape Ray without a credit card.