

Igor's environmental mandates

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Juliana Coffey and an injured short-eared owl that was sent to Salmonier Nature Park for rehabilitation. (photo: Gioia Montevecchi)

The power and fury of Hurricane Igor provided firsthand experience of our vulnerability to natural environmental events. The force and the damage wreaked by such a once-in-a-century event are shocking and depending on circumstance can be terrifying and life-threatening. Increases in extreme weather events predicted by climate change models, so we have to be prepared and plan for environmental surprises.

Much of the damage imposed by the hurricane was historically unprecedented and unavoidable. Yet much of havoc and destruction can be attributed to failures of environmental accommodation.

Giving Mother Nature her due

Many if not most of the roadway blowouts that isolated communities was associated with inadequate water passage. Small pipeline culverts, the civil engineering choice of the day, often do provide adequate water flow for rivers, streams and wetland connections that are severed by road construction.

The environmental inadequacies of roadway engineering are so obvious around the province. An extreme environmental event like Igor shows the inadequacy engineering practices.

Pipeline culverts often sit above extant water levels and prevent the free flow of water. They frequently provide barriers to the movements of fishes. This has been the case in some of the province's best trout and Atlantic salmon rivers.

Pipeline culverts need phasing out and replacement with large inverted U-shaped water passage-ways and where necessary with bridges. These structures permit better water flow and also leave natural stream and river beds intact. The river beds are important for well-being of trout, salmon and other aquatic insects and animals. Arguments that such structures are too expensive do not stand up in

comparison to the massive costs that are now required to repair the unnecessary devastation that inadequate civil and environmental engineering has caused.

Paying attention to the surrounding environment

The low-lying community of Gambo often experiences severe flooding during heavy rains. Much of the forested highlands above the community have been clear-cut and are scarred with skidder trails. Clear-cutting practices kill the networks of the trees' root systems that hold water and soil.

Forests prevent torrents from raging over open ground. Marshes, bogs and wetlands provide the similar types of environmental buffers and services by retaining, filtering and cleaning water. Filling wetlands is a standard developmental practice that has to be accounted for when nature acts out beyond the average.

Sadly and perilously, developmental plans too often ignore adequate consideration of environmental services and risks. Rapid-return economics take priority over environmental accommodation. The developers and the governmental regulators are rarely if ever called to account for failed responsibilities. They have either formed other companies or have moved on.

Who were the politicians who approved poor environmental decisions?

Almost any public building or structure that was supported by citizens' taxes is certain to have a permanent brass plaque crediting the name of the minister sitting in the relevant portfolio at the time of construction. This rather outdated convention is also an inconsistent one.

Shouldn't there also be plaques with the names of the Ministers of Transport and Environment alongside the small culverts and barrier causeways and at failed industrial developments that resulted in major environmental, social and health costs? A name and a signature carry a great deal of responsibility, especially when people and the environment are the bottom line.

Tracking the migration of gannets

With colleagues, collaborators, my research group and I have mounted considerable efforts to track the migration of gannets from Newfoundland and the Gulf of St. Lawrence and their use of the Gulf of Mexico. With support from Environment Canada, the Canadian Wildlife Service and the National Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada, we have managed to attach more than 100 global location sensors on breeding adults and 26 satellite tags of flightless juveniles at four of the six North American colonies of gannets – Funk Island, Baccalieu Island, Cape St. Mary's and Bonaventure Island in Quebec.

Through a contribution by Alex Dalziel of Ottawa, we will soon provide public access to the satellite-tracked movements of the juvenile gannets. I will provide this access in the November column.

Birds in the area and around the province

The raging northwesterly winds of Igor forced thousands of Leach's storm-petrels from Baccalieu into the harbors of Portugal Cove and St. Philips (Peggy Ann Parsons) but not so many into Holyrood Arm (Ian Jones) where they are often concentrated following onshore gales during September and October. The petrels were flying exhaustingly into Igor's roaring winds as they were being forced backwards. Many were blown over the land. Hundreds of gulls were capturing and feeding on the exhausting petrels as they slowed in flight or landed for a brief but fatal respite on the water.

Terry Janes brought me the body of an immature semi-palmated sandpiper that he picked at Cape Spear in Igor's aftermath. Gene Herzberg send me some magnificent photos that he took of a sandhill crane that has been feeding in a harvested cornfield in the Goulds, since September 23. Great egrets have shown up at Cape Spear (Gene Herzberg) and in Branch (Chris Mooney).

A short-eared owl with a broken wing was picked up by a conservation officer in Goose Bay. The owl was cared for and housed by Juliana Coffey and Gioia Montevecchi before being flown to Salmonier Nature Park for assessment and rehab (see photo).

A one-legged European starling was hopping around Lisa Machin and family's bird feeders in Portugal Cove, along with other starlings, fox sparrows, red-breasted nuthatches, flickers and an assortment of blue jays and crows.

Showing of film Arctic Cliff-Hangers

On October 19 during Oceans Week at 730 PM in the INCO Centre - the City of St. John's is sponsoring a free showing of the film – Arctic Cliff-Hangers. The film is focused on seabird research in the Canadian Arctic and won the Best Wildlife Film at the San Francisco Oceans Film Festival (2010). There is also an interesting segment on seabird hunting and a meal of "turrs" in Newfoundland. Steve Smith, the photographer, and Julia Szucs, the producer, will be present and will take questions following the film. A trailer of the film on the Meltwater Film Production website can be linked below if you or anyone wants to get a feel for the film: <http://www.meltwatermedia.ca/site/Arctic-Cliffhangers-movie.html> Come to the film.

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