

This is the future - act accordingly

Birds I View



Sanderling and other shorebirds along coasts
are migrating between Arctic nesting areas and South America

Bill Montevercchi

Take the last tree standing and stuff it up the hole in your culture
I have seen the future and it is murder

Leonard Cohen

I write this column, as I am flying to Deer Lake to participate what promises to be an interesting multi-disciplinary science and art festival entitled “The Future of Nature”. While the title sounds like something straight from the Ivory Tower, the program is intriguing.

Organized by Sean McGrath of MUN’s Philosophy Department, the events include four packed days with an aboriginal sharing circle; speakers from Germany, USA, Canada, MUN, Grenfell College, Costa Rica, Guatemala; art exhibits by local stars including Marlene Creates, Pam Hall and Gerry Squires; dance performances including Lori Clarke and Sarah Joy Stoker; an evening of song and stories with Newfoundland and Labrador icon Gerry Squires and Pamela Morgan; a hike in the Tablelands; a David Maggs’ musical performance by Dark by Five featuring the poetry of Don McKay in St. Patrick’s Church in Woody Point; capped off with round table with Greg Malone, Chief Mi’sel Joe and Meranda Squires, and if that weren’t enough - a hike and boat tour in Western Brook Fjord.

Pondering these events and their amalgamation leaves me awed in anticipation. And in preparation, I have been giving a lot of thought to the current state of nature, the ongoing assaults that it endures, its resilience and its future.

Back to the future – shifting baselines

We conceptualize the future as moving ahead from the present. Based on the evidence and projections at hand, we envision a future as we plan for long-term for social, economic and environmental sustainability and family well-being. This visioning is critically important for reducing uncertainty and making robust adaptive decisions.

The unfortunate ongoing problem is that our decision-making tends to focus singularly on immediate short-term often ideological gains, while future possibilities pale in a haze of ambiguity. One option of grappling with this time-warp is to look back in time to help clarify the way ahead.

Besides being highly instructive, it is necessary to consider the future from the past. Doing so equates the present context with the future of yesterday. Hence, we are living in the future of our parents, grandparents and ancestors.

The shifting baselines idea by Daniel Pauly of UBC is revealing here. Pauly pointed out that researchers tend to use the current baselines when they initiate their careers to gauge change. This mirrors the ways that we interpret change in the world around us – that is - change from current conditions as we know them.

Yet when the next generation comes along, their baseline experience will be very different from our own, and they might not appreciate or evaluate the change in the same way that we would. Hence over the long-term, the danger is that we can be using a progressively decreasing resource or environmental base with which we evaluate change.

So what is considered a robust northern cod stock today would be considered miniscule in the 1970s. It is self-evident that we need consider past as well as current conditions when speculating about change and future development.

Sometimes the importance of shifting baselines is best reflected by those who don't shift their baselines at all. In the early 1900s, my most wonderful grandmother Nana Filomena Panzero was raised in a nunnery (like Cinderella her stepmother didn't want her) in a small village outside Naples. There were no cars, no TVs, no airplanes, no computers. So perhaps it is understandable that in the 1970s when the US landed a man on the moon she didn't believe it, contending that "if God wanted a man on the moon he would have put him there." Being in the throes of my rebellious anti-Vietnam War stage, I felt like I got her point.

Resolution of environmental tragedies in the future

I cannot remember being involved with any issue concerning human or environmental tragedy when the elixir statement hasn't been "this won't happen again in the future" [pick your

own example]. Perhaps this is all we can do and surely what we must, but preventable disasters do happen again and again – for example, the engineering errors responsible for the failure of the blowout preventers in the Gulf of Mexico *Deepwater Horizon* disaster.

We are however in possession of more than adequate technical knowledge and an ethical compass with which to navigate and to understand perfectly well what is appropriate and what isn't. And if we acted in the present as if we were also the future, then we could be better able to evaluate change and to do what needs doing now and to prevent things that should not be done.

For the most part, this need not be an onerous task, but rather one that involves a radical shift of perspective that allows for accommodation for nature. It's not easy to let go or to let it be, though later or sooner we will have to. So why not sooner? We don't have to continue to proliferate scorched earth approaches that will see sprawling suburbia of St. John's stretch all the way to Whitbourne.

Birds in the area

Fall flocks of 40 – 60 Canada geese are aggregating in Harricott and North Harbour St, Mary's Bay. A pair of gadwalls were visiting a brackish saltwater inlet in Musgrave Harbour in late August [Janet Montevvecchi].

Light-breasted immature double-crested cormorants and light-bellied great cormorants in Portugal Cove signal their successful breeding in the area. Yellowlegs, sanderlings, white-rumped sandpipers, ruddy turnstones and semi-palmated plovers were flocking on the beach at Musgrave Harbour and Greenspond in late August [Bob Gendron]. A pair of Caspian terns were relaxing on rock in Carmanville Harbour on 1 September.

Northern Harriers are abundant in open country with the red-chested juveniles making a strong showing. They are especially evident at Cape St. Mary's attracted by the massive meadow vole population [Chris Mooney, Kyran Power]. A crow roost in Mount Pearl has attracted John Morris's attention. Noisy roosting crow assemblages are often more evident in late summer and fall.

A tan-striped white-throated sparrow that flew into the house and a palm warbler and a song sparrow on the deck provided interesting surprises at Auk House in Musgrave Harbour at the end of August. Adult and juvenile red crossbills, pine grosbeaks and other finches are shucking black oil sunflower seeds at feeder in Torbay [Scott Grant].

Contacts – mont@mun.ca, 695-5305 [c], 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h]