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**Budget cuts to environment and conservation are lethal
Birds I View
Bill Montevecchi**



Cape St. Mary's Seabird Ecological Reserve (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

“Newfoundland and Labrador's wildlife resources are at the heart our province's heritage and culture.” The opening line of the former Department of Environment and Climate Change website says it all. If only we believed it.

The ongoing “death by a thousand cuts” has achieved its goal. The province’s environmental support structures have been damaged to the point of incapacitation. And who’s fault is it? The absence of outcry from the general public and from environmental organizations bear silent witness to the action.

We can all agree on the need for budget-tightening, but when one compares the spending without limit approach at Muskrat Falls with the continual deconstruction of the province’s environmental and conservation support structures the arguments wear thin.

The elimination of programs, the firings of expert biologists and environmental scientists and the hodgepoded organizational reform of the province’s environment and other departments has created a non-functional system. An example is informative.

WERAC (the Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Advisory Council), an 11 volunteer-member board appointed by Cabinet is the pivotal arm of the once-touted most powerful provincial environmental legislation in Canada. As a legislated body in the Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Act (WERA), the council’s responsibility is to advise Cabinet about creation and management of wilderness and ecological reserves. To do so, WERAC reported through the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change. The Parks and Natural Areas

Division in the Department of Environment and Climate Change provided WERAC's secretariat and was its driving work force.

But wait that was last month. With the latest round of budget cuts, there is no Department of Environment and Climate Change, no Minister, and no Parks and Natural Areas Division.

The department has been dissected and down-graded. Remnants can be found in the new oddly hinged department of Services and Climate Change and in the new department of Municipal Affairs and Environment. Although the Parks and Natural Areas Division was housed in the Department of Environment and Climate Change, its dissections were assigned to neither of these new departments. Rather the Parks part was shuttled into the new department of Business, Tourism, Industry and Innovation (and everything else?), and the Natural Areas component was shunted to the new Agrifoods and Lands Branch in the new department of Fisheries and Land Resources.

If you are having trouble trying to grasp the coherence, logic or efficiency of this reorganization (which speaks volumes about the absence of larger vision), you are in good company. And WERAC? It was trundled off with the Natural Areas group into the new Agrifoods and Land Resources Division.

What else has been sacrificed?

The Wildlife Division once a productive science agency well respected for its ecological expertise on caribou, ptarmigan and other game and fur-bearing animals has been gutted – and exists essentially in name only. Cuts in environmental assessment, wetlands stewardship and endangered species undermine the Division's rationale.

The Forestry Division which not so long ago was championed by world-class scientists has been clear-cut, slashed and burned. The remains have been lumped with the Wildlife Division in a new section called Forestry and Wildlife Research – a glowing misnomer since their scientific capabilities have been eliminated.

Our magnificent network of Seabird Ecological Reserves so often exploited for tourism photo-ops are simply taken for granted. These reserves are minimally supported - none have managers – they were fired in 2013. Only in a Third World country could one find a comparable lack of concern.

The frightening implication of these actions is that evidence-based decision-making founded on the best scientific information has been purged. This is an obvious extension of the ideological and economic spin philosophy that approved and subsidized the Greig open-sea aquaculture project in Placentia Bay. Spin will trump evidence much more conveniently now.

Why does the environment always take the brunt of the cuts?

I can't answer that question but part of the rationale seems geographic. So much of our environmental work is based on the west coast (beyond the overpass leading out of St. John's), it's an easy target. It almost seems as if that's why they were put there.

There's not much left, so what's next? Expect crisis management and a rerun of the disastrous privatization scheme that crushed the provincial parks system during 1990s.

Newfoundland and Labrador has committed to protecting at least 17% of its land and inland waters by 2020. At present we're under 10%, well below the Canadian average. With elimination of staff needed to do the work, this commitment is but a paper exercise.

But rest easy as the Liberal Government's 2015 A Stronger Way Forward assures us, "The PC Government has let their stated goal of establishing and releasing a Natural Areas System Plan fall by the wayside. A New Liberal Government will finalize this plan and publicly release it." Hollow statements like these are fill-in-the-blank exercises which successions of governments use to perpetuate blame on predecessors while failing to act on their own merits.

Back to the future

In 1984, the Natural History Society of Newfoundland and Labrador bestowed its Tuck-Walters Award on George Chafe – a dedicated civil servant who played a major role in establishing the provincial parks system. The 1960 and 70s were the heady Smallwood years when wilderness and wildlife were untrammalled, yet government had the foresight to value our natural heritage and culture. Were George Chafe working today, he'd have been axed.

What I have learned over the years working with all levels of government staff is their professionalism, dedication and steadfast often heroic work ethic. Many have been fired and those who retained positions must feel the denigration of being cow-tied in other portfolios with other responsibilities knowing their efforts weren't worth the investment. I hope they have the strength to carry on professionally and productively. Someone has to guard our province's heritage and culture.

Doves in the area

Mourning dove have been faring well in PCSP this winter. At Christmas, a dozen doves were in Rex Porter's Tolt Road property. Two are still around, and Rex is sure that the doves are nesting nearby as downy young have been seen in summer.

Birds I View columns are available at <http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>.
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