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**Blaming scientists while demanding unsustainable quotas
Birds I View
Bill Montevecchi**



Image of cod in Basque community of Guéthary on the southern coast of France - fishing on the Grand Banks during the 1600s. (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

Recent protests reflect problems with the fishery. They highlight the tradition of over-exploiting stocks to commercial extinction. That's how the business is run. That's how it's always been run. And that's how it will continue. With very few exceptions, it is modus operando of all fisheries world-wide.

Here and throughout Canada that means that DFO has mismanaged the fishery. But why? When DFO proposes sustainable and cautionary quotas, as has been done for shrimp and crab, who demands higher quotas? It's not scientists. It's not seals, and it's not foreigners.

Whenever conservative quotas are recommended, the FFAW, corporate lobbyists and fishermen demand higher unsustainable catches. Their mantra is that the science is wrong and that there are really more fish (crab, shrimp) out there than scientists report. If that were true why is it that every species we fish – is overfished?

The bottom line lies with federal managers in Ottawa. Too often they have been pressured by politicians who feel the heat from fishing communities and corporate lobbyists. In the process, self-destructing quotas are approved, mismanagement proceeds, and everyone stops complaining for a while until the stocks are devastated.

The inevitable end game is further demand for compensation. That is - payment for the destruction wrought by the unsustainable harvests that the fishers insisted on in the first instance. How then can anyone with a clean conscience or even a reasonable sense of logic argue against sustainable fishing approaches on the one hand and blame the federal agency for mismanagement on the other? It's a broken system.

No conservation following the moratorium

When the massive northern cod stocks were pummelled to commercial extinction, there was never a more meaningful time in Newfoundland history to take constructive conservation action. Yet there were no proposals for protected areas to facilitate the rebuilding of the cod and capelin stocks. There was simply a fishery closure because there were no fish to catch.

There was lots of blame going around. Scientists, foreigners and seals were deemed to be the problem. But as for responsible proactive initiatives, there was nothing. Nothing. The silence has been deafening.

Fishery targets simply switched to the food of cod – shrimp, crab and capelin. Like cod the shellfish are being rapidly over-fished to commercial extinction. For pittances per pound, purse-seiners target the egg-carrying females. They are literally fishing the next generation of the key forage fish needed for the recovery of cod. Capelin also provide essential nourishment for seabirds, seals and whales. Capelin are more valuable in the water than in a purse sein. Most fishermen are well aware of this.

The elephant in the room

Technology has changed everything. In late April, the Ocean Choice International and Clearwater Seafoods battleships – the *Katsheshuk II* shrimp trawler and the *Belle Cannell* deep-sea vacuum clammer were in St. John's. These vessels have devastating capability. As a National Sea dragger fleet commander explained rather matter-of-factly to me in the 1980s, "We know where the fish are and we can get them all". The corporate boardrooms that command the factory ships are well aware of what is available to them. Though even addressing this issue is complicated as first nations' offshore quotas are available to corporate bidders.

What's going on in our oceans is not pretty. Given the way business as usual is conducted, a make-over is unlikely. In the meantime blaming scientists and making unsustainable demands will only dig a deep hole deeper.

Birds in the Area

On 20 April, Walter Harding had a hat trick of double-crested cormorants at Bowring Park ... keep shooting Walter. On 25 April, Janet Montevicchi worked with Team Gushue Highway to score a bittern flying alongside a stretch of bogs. On April 26, a snipe was winnowing and a loon yodeling at Neary's Pond (the Mayos).

Arctic ice is likely to impose late nesting for seabirds with potentially negative consequences. The massive murre and gannet colonies on Funk Island are surrounded in pack ice. Tony Power has noted late nesting by kittiwakes at Cape Race.

In mid-April, two pairs of black-headed gulls with rosy nuptial feathering were foraging on the shoreline while an otter foraged among the ice pans off Ragged Harbour on the northeast

coast. Rare breeders in Newfoundland, black-headed gulls formerly nested on nearby Ladle Island. Good to see them back in the area.

Clarenville and Shoal Harbour are waterfowl hotspots. In mid-April, 40 Canada geese, 125 greater scaup (with some lesser scaup), 40 common mergansers, 12 ring-necked ducks with stunningly plumaged males, and one male white-winged scoter were counted Shoal Harbour.

Four bald eagles, possibly a family of two adults and two immatures, floating above Beachy Cove Mountain in early April (Katie Arnott, Gioia Montevecchi). Likely they were scanning the pack-ice with their keen visual acuity that is equivalent to our use of 6X binoculars. Two breeding plumaged pairs of red-breasted mergansers foraged in the outflow of the Beachy Cove River in an open water area in the pack ice in early April (Janet Montevecchi).

A snowy owl showed up on Ramea on 10 April (Richard Northcott) and a dark-phase rough-legged hawk was hunting the meadows along the Straight Shore on 24 April (Janet Montevecchi).

A mourning dove rested placidly of the phone wires near Witch Hazel Road on Tucker's Hill in Portugal Cove, and also in mid-April a rock dove (pigeon) was wire-sitting on turnoff to Deadman's Bay. Rock doves are nesting on the steep cliffs in a ravine below Picco's Path in Portugal Cove where ravens had a brood of newly hatched naked nestlings on 29 April.

Robins were everywhere on the northeast coast in mid-April but were run out of town by heavy snows and northerly gales. The first fox sparrow arrived on 13 April. Unimpeded by circumstance on a blustery snowy Easter Saturday a chippy house sparrow explored a bird house in Musgrave Harbour, and on Easter a courageous song sparrow belted a "sweet, sweet" song driven by day length and testosterone. The juncos have been trilling since late April.

Bird of the month goes to Sue Kelland Dyer who in early May, photographed a barn swallow that has been flying around and checking her house at Cape La Haye for a nest-site.

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