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**The disappearance of millions of Newfoundland seabirds
Birds I View
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Southern end of the Baccalieu Island Seabird Ecological Reserve –
home to the world’s largest colony of Leach’s storm-petrels (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

Where have all the storm-petrels gone? Storm-petrels are the most abundant seabird breeding in eastern Canada. They appear at night in dizzying millions at major colonies on our coast. When a species is so prolific, population changes are actually often difficult to detect until they reach crisis proportions – think cod, capelin, caribou.

Seabirds are the primary indicators of ocean pollution. They have been the focus of environmental monitoring plans since offshore oil exploration began on the Grand Banks. Under the “regulation” of the Canada-Newfoundland Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board (C-NLOPB), these have been irrelevant paper exercises.

The nocturnal Leach’s storm-petrel or carey chick as fishermen refer to them is the most vulnerable seabird to offshore platforms. These tiny robin-sized seabirds are attracted to platform flares and lights where they succumb to collisions, burning and oiling.

The world's largest nesting colony of Leach's storm-petrels is on the Baccalieu Island Seabird Ecological Reserve with 7 to 8 million birds (more than 10 million counting chicks) during the 1980s. Since then and coincident with offshore oil development, this population and the massive population in the Witless Bay Seabird Ecological Reserve have plummeted by 40 to 50 percent or more. Many millions of seabirds are missing.

What happened to the missing millions of seabirds?

The population demise could result from many causes. Predation by gulls at colonies, mercury pollution, mortality at offshore platforms or some combination of these or other factors could be implicated. During the past 25 years, gull numbers and predation pressure have waned, owing largely to the cod moratorium and cessation of waste scraps from fishing boats. Storm-petrels carry mercury burdens that are being studied by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS). Low adult survival rates and high breeding success at major colonies suggest that winter food supplies could be impacted by ocean climate change.

The biggest gap in our knowledge about storm-petrel risk and mortality surrounds the offshore oil rigs. However, because no scientifically valid monitoring program was required by the C-NLOPB, there is no information. The irony is that a straight-forward scientific monitoring program was offered to the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), the C-NLOPB and the oil companies at the outset of production in 1999. Given that seabirds have been focal monitoring animals at every public hearing for offshore development and that it would be quite tractable to monitor them at platforms, how can this be the case?

The simple answer is complicity between the C-NLOPB and the oil companies. The system is rigged through provisions in the Atlantic Accord allowing corporate confidentiality about pollution and other activity. Though the general public deserves transparency and information flow, the process is mired with encryption and evidential blockages.

No information is a corporate strategy. It is supported by the C-NLOPB. We cannot see what is happening on the edge of the Grand Banks. Owing to the lack of information, we envision no issues when in fact we just don't know. Were the situation closer to home as in Witless Bay we might interpret matters differently.

Independent observers have never been allowed on platforms - self-regulation is the rule. Tracking research at Memorial University of Newfoundland and CWS led by Dr. April Hedd demonstrates that storm-petrels from the largest colonies that are plummeting feed near platforms and migrate in the area during autumn.

Much can be done to minimize risks

Seabird occurrences and mortality at platforms tends to be episodic. So careful documentation is needed to understand these interactions. A comprehensive regulatory regime could then devise mitigation procedures to reduce risk. Eliminating extraneous and skyward projected light, shading windows, scheduling flare shutdowns during migration periods, using colored lighting, recycling waste water could all be investigated as means to reduce marine bird,

mammal and fish attraction. No such effort has been required by the regulator or made by the oil companies.

There are legal and ethical reasons to determine the extent to which seabirds are being impacted by human activity and dying due hydrocarbon extraction offshore. Under the current regulatory regime this is a moot point.

We live in climate of political untruths. The premier, the provincial and federal ministers, CAPP and the Newfoundland and Offshore Industry Association tout that environmental regulation by C-NLOPB is excellent. This is simply dishonest. To ensure adequate environmental vigilance on the ocean that belongs to all of us, we need federal oversight.

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