

Sealing, anti-sealing and reality

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi

The good

The National Film Board documentary, *My Ancestors Were Rogues and Murderers*, recently aired on CBC News World. Hopefully, there will be many more showings.

Anne Troke, the film's creator, has crafted a magnificent affirmation of the seal hunt in the culture and traditions of coastal Newfoundlanders. The documentary is woven around an enchanting and engaging narrative by Anne's late Grandmother Jesse Drover of Twillingate. Through historic and current content, we witness the credibility of the late Gary Troke and his father Jack as they talk about sealing and the engagement of a full and fulfilling coastal existence.

Affirmation of seal hunt comes from many quarters. The crowd at the Juno Award ceremonies in Halifax vociferously rejected Pamela Anderson's hollow, glib morality and her call for an end to the hunt. The transparent, hypocritical positions espoused by so many of the hunter's opponents are telling.

The bad

The Associated Press's coverage of Ms. Anderson's activities at the Junos was also telling. No mention was made of the crowd's rejection of her presumptuous, inaccurate statements. AP reported that Ms. Anderson had thrown her support behind the ever-growing protests against the seal hunt. It's called "news" but when it gets reported like this - it's media propaganda designed to manufacture consent.

The ugly

Paul Watson, skipper of the Sea Shepherd vessel *Farley Mowat*, has compared Newfoundlanders to the Nazi Third Reich. Here are some of his comments about Anne Troke's film and beyond.

“Her ancestors were indeed rogues and murderers though I am surprised that someone would take pride in this fact. ... I have no respect for Newfoundlanders. They debased Canada when they joined the nation in 1949 and they continue to embarrass us in the eyes of the world as they inflict bloody carnage on innocent creatures, peddling seal penises and their silly seal flipper pie to the ecological perverts who actually pay for these obscenities. Newfoundland is a place where priests rape orphans, where majestic pilot whales were ground into mink food, where fishermen torture seabirds for fun ...” There’s lots more and undoubtedly more to come.

Watson is an icon of fabrication. With that he attracts inordinate media attention.

The media challenge

According to Watson it is irrelevant what Newfoundlanders and Labradorians think. The seal hunt will be closed by outside pressures.

These pressures come in the form of boycotts of Canadian fish by restaurant chains like Legal Seafoods and Red Lobster and by Costco pulling seal oil capsules from the shelves. These pressures are not insurmountable. They have to be challenged.

Confronting misinformation in all quarters

Many hunt supporters are misdirected. To argue that killing seals will help capelin or cod stocks or that killing them helps us maintain balance in nature are wrong. Removing predators is not a sure way to increase a prey stock. We have “removed” northern cod by over-fishing, yet there is no apparent “benefit” to its capelin prey.

Further, our perpetual pattern of over-harvesting fish and all wildlife to decimation levels makes us among the least likely of species to be entrusted with restoring or maintaining “balance in nature”. This heavily paternalistic perspective of the natural world is a very significant part of our ongoing wildlife and environmental problems.

Birds in the area and around the province

The first gannets soared over the snow-covered cliffs of Cape St. Mary’s on 16 March, a day ahead of schedule on St. Patrick’s Day (Tony Power). By April 9, about a third of the nest-sites on Bird Rock were occupied by gannets.

At Cape St. Francis, 8,000 – 10,000 eiders were rafting near the rocks (Bruce Turner). A snowy owl winged silently along the Cape St. Mary's Road on 9 April.

Burnt orange fox sparrows are back and sliding their resilient spring whistles in Portugal Cove and around the Avalon. Juncos are getting feisty and seeking more individual space than the terminal flocks of winter allow. Their trills are ringing from the tops of fir and spruce.

Five red crossbills have returned to Lester Rees's feeders in Whitbourne. A white-throated sparrow over-wintered in the area, and a flock of more than 30 evening grosbeaks is shucking sunflower seeds.

Lingering snow buntings and Iceland gulls should soon be headed north to their Arctic breeding grounds.



Female red crossbill visiting a feeder site in Whitbourne (photo: L Rees)

Oiled seabirds - again

On 3 April, Jackie Burke reported an oiled murre on the rocks Harbour Front Park. Chantelle Burke and I picked up the oiled thick-billed murre.

My daughter Gioia, son Nicholas and I attempted to clean and nurture this weakened wild creature of the North Atlantic. It was a desperate and

demoralizing effort. After just over a week the murre died. Yet, this magnificent but stricken seabird provided a profound lesson in vulnerability and innocence.

Tony Power reported oiled birds coming ashore on the southern Avalon on 8 – 9 April. My wife Janet and I had checked beaches at Cuslett, Gooseberry Cove and Point Verde on 9 April, and no birds were coming ashore there.

By week's end on Good Friday, about 500 oiled seabirds had been documented. On April 10, coast guard officials suggested that birds may be contaminated with crude oil. Yet, 5 days later, there was still no report from the Environment Canada lab in Moncton where the oil assays are carried out.

This isn't rocket science. Where are the data? There needs to be public and scientific scrutiny of these data. If the birds have crude oil on them, then the source is likely a tanker moving in near shore waters. We are aware of at least one tanker that has made such a movement.

These analyses could be carried out in Newfoundland effectively and in a timelier manner, unimpeded by bureaucratic pressures. Why do we always have to wait for such late and obscure feedback from Moncton? Why are the surveillance flights that yet again missed this pollution event based out of Moncton when the problem is here in Newfoundland?

Doesn't anyone in the mainland or central Canadian bureaucracy think we can do anything here? Does anyone here think that we can't do it better?

Keep looking.