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The sins of the fishery fall on the seals
Birds I View
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When did we start hating seals? Was it after the cod moratorium after we had gillnetted and dragged all the cod out of the ocean?

While assuming little responsibility for the decimation of cod, we blamed scientists, we blamed foreigners, and we blamed seals. We still do.

For millennia and well up into the past century, seals were the saviours of our coastal communities. When seals arrived on the arctic pack ice in the lean and hungry famine month of March, they provided the nutrition that saved many coastal residents from certain starvation. Seals were more revered than hated. Killing and respecting them were essential compatible expressions.

When our seal hunt was proceeding full-tilt in the 19th and most of the 20th century, sealers killed baby seals but they didn't hate them. So why is there so much hate for seals now? Is it because Green Peace fought to shut down our seal hunt, and so instead of loving seals like they seemed to – we turned to hating them?

Seals, cod and capelin

The best scientific evidence on the influence of seals on cod comes from DFO scientists. Their analyses indicate that harp seals are not hindering the recovery of the northern cod stock. Harp seals spend about 6 months of the year in the arctic where they are outside the range of northern cod and where they eat other prey. Any influence of seals on cod interact with climate effects on their food supply – capelin – and fishing mortality. And it appears that the poor state of capelin and fishing pressure likely impose greater influence on the cod population than seals do

Some have argued that the seals' consumption of capelin is the problem that needs rectifying. We know that the northwest Atlantic Ocean has sustained massive populations of both seals and fish in the past, and it is important to consider that it has the resiliency to do so again.

Hunts versus culls

The harp seal population is large and robust and can sustain a large scale hunt. The greatest hindrance to promoting a successful hunt is the lack of markets for seal products. Yet in a world threatened by climate crisis, the harvest of sustainable protein, fir and oil from seals in a clean ocean could help immensely in alleviating our dependence on produced meat and other commodities. The health benefits of seal oil are just too overwhelming to be ignored.

Because we have been stymied in our efforts to promote the seal hunt, renewed calls for culls of harp seals are loud and widespread. The choir includes the Canadian Sealers Association, Carino Producers, fishers and the FFAW.

Perhaps the most obvious demonstration that culls of predators don't result in increases of their primary prey is the demise of the cod fishery itself. Capelin was and is the primary food of northern cod. In the 1980s cod were estimated to consume 1,000,000 to 3,000,000 tonnes of capelin. Think about those quantities and try to imagine the enormous numbers of capelin eaten by cod every year.

Common sense might suggest that following the overfishing of cod that capelin numbers would increase. This is not what happened. Instead as the northern cod stock was driven to commercial extinction, the capelin stock also crashed due to ocean climate influences on its planktonic food supply. Predator and prey interactions are complicated and involve many species and environmental conditions and in marine ecosystems these interactions are usually indirect.

We can apply the same rationale to seals. Killing seals will not increase numbers of cod. While crab and shrimp stocks increased following the cod's demise, if we wanted to increase capelin stocks by killing cod, we simply cannot do it.

Even if the seal cull advocates were allowed to proceed, what might they suggest be done? From population of 7,400,000 seals, would they suggest killing 1,000,000 seals? 2,000,000? 5,000,000? Or killing them all? We cannot even envision such carnage nor would

rational people accept such an unfounded blood-letting. Our markets for fish would no doubt be damaged if such a cull took place, and on what evidence would it be based?

What could be done to promote the recovery of cod?

Here are three suggestions – 1 stop fishing capelin, 2 stop discarding cod and 3 increase hand-line fishing.

Most people and I daresay most fishermen (even including some who fish capelin) know that the capelin fishery like other "egg-fisheries" is counterproductive. The extinction of sturgeon and the local fishery for lumpfish eggs are examples of egg-fishery failures. Terminating the capelin fishery would be a positive investment in the cod's food supply. Capelin left in the water are worth more than capelin squashed in a purse seine.

Some fishers set more cod gillnets than are needed to fill their weekly quotas. When this happens and the excess fish cannot be sold - they are discarded. And from some recent reports that I have heard this can be a lot of fish.

Many fishers handline most or even all of their weekly quotas, and most fishermen hand-line some fish. Hand-lining yields higher quality live fish that fetch higher prices than gillnetted fish while reducing the need for gillnet fishing and its unwanted bycatch of non-target species.

Marine Serengeti

In our clouded and negatively charged perspectives of seals, we are blinded to their natural wonderment. The spring migration of harp seals from the arctic to our waters and into the Gulf of St. Lawrence is one of the most incredible wildlife spectacles on the planet.

Surely adventure tourism could include seal herd expeditions. These needn't be incompatible with a hunt. We hunt murres and we take tourists to visit them in our seabird reserves during. Many former fishermen and even whalers are now engaged in adventure tourism employment involving seabirds, whales and fishing. So why wouldn't we consider expeditions to the ice flows to view seals which just happen to be here in the lean and hungry tourism month of March?

Conclusions

There are not too many seals. There are too few fish. And we can't blame the seals for that.

There are many things that we can do to improve fish stocks. Culling seals is not one them. Alternatively, we can delude ourselves into thinking that we are masters of the universe rather than participants, and charge ahead with myopic plans for seal culls. Then again we could just blame foreigners.

Birds in the area

Yodelling loons have been flying over by Neary's Pond in Portugal Cove. The source of the action must be Windsor Lake where a flock of 14 common loons was recently sighted (Rita Anderson, Donna Clouston).

Leach's storm-petrels are coming ashore in Elliston and red foxes are taking advantage of the situation. More than 75 carcasses were counted in June and July (Laura King, Claudia Knowles). In early August, two adult great horned owls were flushed from a feeding site along the Oliver's Pond trail (Kathryn Welbourne, Julie Huntington). I received a magnificent specimen of a female belted kingfisher that had crashed into a window on the Mayo's deck by Neary's Pond where sharp-shinned hawks have been chasing crows and kingfishers (Carolyn Mayo).

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