

Nature Abhors a Vacuum and Celebrates a Reprieve

Birds I View
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A white-throated sparrow proclaims that it is spring. Although the cold weather has muted some of the celebration, it's happening. (photo: Gene Herzberg)

Life begets life and resilience is its fundamental precept. So what can we do during this time of local and global shutdown? What can be learned? How can we proceed?

As is evident, doing nothing is proving to be a robust and beneficial environmental action. Our footprints have been stopped in their tracks or at least reduced to a slow dance on global scale. The earth's living biosphere has likely not encountered such an event during the course of human evolution, certainly not since the industrial revolution.

We are in the throes of a pandemic fueled and facilitated in large part by abusive environmental interactions. Is the earth on a self-correction mode or just taking a needed respite? Actually, we are shaping our own destiny. Researchers in Europe are reporting associations between the numbers of covid-19 cases and levels of air pollution in an area, with high associations around cities like Milan and Madrid. Air pollution carries costs that can be lethal.

Will we develop new appreciation of the life-support benefits that a naturally functioning relatively unperturbed ecosystem provides - clear air, clean water, flood buffering? Will that certainty become a cognitive and political reality?

Even though we have precipitated the current pandemic, we cannot control it. We must hunker down and work hard so it doesn't get the better of us. We have to accommodate and adjust to the demands that the pandemic imposes. We are not in control – it's a strange situation for such a capable species, and it is also an important lesson.

Environmental and wildlife benefits

Oil and gas demand is down worldwide. The resultant downtime in air and vehicular travel have decreased hydrocarbon emissions and gifted the atmosphere a much needed breather.

The human consequences are profound. While air pollution is associated with covid-19 occurrences, reductions in air pollution should reduce smog-associated respiratory ailments, like asthma. The costs can be tempered and benefits gained.

Reductions in offshore activity might also reduce extraneous flaring and oceanic lighting. These fatal attractions kill far too many seabirds, including the tiny Leach's storm-petrels whose populations have plummeted in recent decades.

Delays and possible closures of some fisheries will negatively affect fishers in the short-term though undoubtedly benefit them in the longer-term through increases in stock biomass. A somewhat similar effect followed the world wars during which most fisheries were curtailed.

Fewer seabirds, salmon, seals and whales will get entangled in gillnets when fewer gillnets are in the water. And in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, fewer right whales could benefit from reductions in fishing gear.

The curtailment of adventure tourism in our ecological reserves and national parks will likely benefit wildlife in the ocean and on land. While seabirds and whales are often protected from disturbance by local tourism operators, the marine animals will not miss the human visitations

Next steps

We want to return to work to engage our livelihoods more fully. As we do, we must realize how beneficial our lighter footprint is to both the environment and to us.

Much of our self-distanced activity has given us a better appreciation of what we really need and what we don't. This can be a time of grounding and mindfulness.

We can temper our excessive buying and over-development. We can act locally to accommodate the wetlands, forests, rivers and ocean that envelope us. And if we do, the resilient nature of the earth and ocean will provide the restorative strength that is key to our personal and social survival.

If we give ourselves a break from the daily grind and engage what we do in a more mindful and holistic manner, we will be the better for it. To allow nature the same opportunity is to just let it be. No more, no less.

Development vs rural community integrity

The PCSP council and Development and Planning Committee seem uneasy with the benefits provided by undeveloped areas in our community.

When the St. John's Urban Regional Plan allotted PCSP the opportunity to rezone agricultural land, it was with the proviso that the town hold public hearings before taking any action. And even though this has not been done, the town forged ahead with public hearings about re-zoning the area known as Maggie's Place from agricultural to medium density development.

Land owners clearly want the opportunity to gain benefits from their properties. But there is a disconnect between this option and the creation of large-scale housing developments.

In a perfect world, landowners would be compensated for maintaining properties in an undeveloped state. The use of land for family housing seems to be a given, but when large-scale land sales are for developments that affect the entire community then these transactions are not simply about their rights. We are all stake-holders in such transactions, and we all have a say, not just the landowners and the developers.

People were more than able to deal with land transactions well before housing developers and their homogenous views of living spaces came on the scene. We can and should move forward in our community without these constraints on the quality and truly rural not just the seemingly rural character of our community.

The Development and Planning Committee is also violating the intent of the Traditional Community Zone. The intent of which "is to preserve and enhance the traditional character and landscape of the original harbour communities in the vicinity of Portugal Cove and St. Philip's." It is not meant to accommodate vested interests (<https://pcsp.ca/site/uploads/2020/05/Public-Hearing-MPA-5-and-DRA-6-Website.pdf>). This is not community interest.

We have options and it is fool-hardy of us to ignore them

Birds in the area

Spring arrivals are returning. Common loons were at Neary's Pond on 7-8 May. Ospreys were observed in late April at Long Pond (Jon Garvin) and in Chamberlains (Shawn Fitzpatrick) while many local ponds were still iced over. Snipe were winnowing over the bogs on at Voisey's Brook Park in early May (Carolyn and George Mayo).

Ruffed grouse are on the move and have been seen by Neary's Pond (the Mayos), in St. Philips (Pam Williams), and on Tucker's Hill (Calvin Butt) in Portugal Cove.

Red crossbills are making a good showing over the entire area with flocks observed at Hughes Pond (Rita Anderson), Healy's Pond (Chantelle Burke), Neary's Pond (Janet Montevecchi), St. John's (Ian Jones) and CBS (Roy Ficken).

It's spring ... take breather.

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