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A protected areas plan for Newfoundland

**Birds I View
Bill Montevecchi**



The Mistaken Point Ecological Reserve protects the oldest multicellular life form on Earth and is also a grand place for watching seabirds. (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

Why do we need protected areas? For one – we are entrusted with the pristine ecological systems that we inherited and that sustain life on our planet. And while we exploit them to live, we have overexploited to the point of ecosystem destruction and collapse.

Current climate and covid crises highlight our vulnerability and the necessity to protect biodiversity for our well-being and survival. Associations between air pollution and the incidence of covid cases in Europe while not linked to causal effects are telling warning signs. We cannot manufacture pure air or water, our forests, wetlands and oceans do that for us. Yet we ignore those environmental service providers and compromise their integrity and functionality. Protected areas are a powerful means for sustaining some of the earth and ocean's biodiversity and life support mechanisms.

A Home for Nature

After 25 years of frustrated and thwarted effort the Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Advisory Council [WERAC] has offered a public proposal for the creation of a system of protected areas in the different ecoregions on the Island. Labrador was included in the original plan but will be a part of future considerations. WERAC is a volunteer, independent advisory body appointed by the provincial government as legislated under the Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Act [WERA]. The council advises the provincial cabinet through the responsible minister on protected reserves in Newfoundland and Labrador.

WERA was enacted in 1980 and is one most effective environmental laws in Canada. Yet why is it that with such powerful legislation and our exuberant passion for our natural environment that our protected areas pale in comparison with those of other provinces and territories (NL ranks third from the bottom)? And why have protected so little of our land (6.7% of the Island; 6.9% of NL) comprising only about a third of our commitment with Canada for 17% protection by 2020? Something isn't right with this picture.

The motivation for WERA was germinated in 1974 when the Central Newfoundland Wildlife Reserve, the Island's largest protected ever, was removed by the stroke of a minister's pen. The Wildlife Act which had "protected" the huge central area also had a proviso that allowed Ministerial discretion.

Owing to widespread dismay, a wildlands committee of concerned citizens and bureaucrats drafted the WERA for the creation of Ecological and Wilderness Reserves through formal decree in the House of Assembly. The WERA protected reserves from ministerial discretion. The only way a reserve once designated could be delisted was through formal vote in the House of Assembly. Ministerial discretion was not an option.

This type of legislation is essential for protected areas. For example, in the mid-1990s our magnificent system of 70 provincial parks was devastated by the Tobin Government [Sandra Kelly responsible minister]. Fifty-six parks were deregulated for privatization – taking the life blood out of the parks network. Had the parks been protected under more potent legislation like WERA, the government could not have delisted them so simply and easily.

As the late nature photographer Ansel Adams reminds us still – "It is horrifying to have to fight the government to protect the environment." We need robust protection for special areas to protect them from the whims of government.

Success of the WERA

The application of the WERA has provided some stunning results. Consider the Burnt Cape Ecological Reserve in the limestone barrens of the Great Northern Peninsula, the Bay du Nord Wilderness Area in central Newfoundland and the Cape St. Mary's and Witless Bay Ecological Seabird Reserves.

In 1996, in the shadow of the loss of our provincial parks network, WERAC realized that a comprehensive system of Ecological and Wilderness Reserves was needed protect representative areas in each of the province's different ecoregions from industrial development. Yet along the way WERAC lost traction with government. Matters stalled, and even though about 95% of the province was open for development, every attempt at moving a protected forward was stymied by mining and forestry departments and lobbies.

Responsible minister after responsible minister failed to move the agenda forward. Each in turn failed appreciate the act and failed to uphold either the letter or the intent of the legislation. This became too much for me to rationalize and I could no longer be complicit in what felt like a dishonest government process. As the longest standing member on the WERA Council, I resigned in February, as did co-chair Victoria Neville.

Fortunately, WERAC and government staff soldiered on and just released an urgently needed protected areas plan for public input. You can find the stunning information package – “A Home for Nature” online (<https://www.engagenl.ca/engagement-initiatives/home-nature-protected-areas-plan-island-newfoundland>) and let your opinions be known.

The initial backlash to the proposal has been intense especially from the Northern Peninsula where large forested areas have been identified for protection. Beyond criticism, many reactionary responses include explicit threats of gun violence and note the addresses of WERAC members. Misogynist comments and blatant intimidation of former WERAC co-chair Victoria Neville and other women and male councilors must be prosecuted. They are much too dangerous to be ignored.

It is incumbent on Minister Gerry Byrne to callout the perpetrators and to defend the WERA Council for which he is responsible. Local MHA Mitchelmore should do the same and must stop misinforming the public about the proposal and process

It is time to engage a rational discussion about protected areas in the province. We no longer have the luxury of degrading our life support systems. On 18 June at 7 pm I am giving a talk on these issues during the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) virtual annual meeting (https://twitter.com/search?q=cpaws&src=typed_query) – please link in and join in the conversation. Your children and your grandparents will thank you.

Birds in the area

Harry Sheppard built and set out a dozen shelters for nesting eider on Grandfather's Island near Seldom, Fogo Island (Gordon Slade). Common terns were flitting about St. Philips beach on 22 May.

In Musgrave Harbour immature Iceland and glaucous gulls were lingering in mid-to lay May (Marina Montevicchi). Snipe were winnowing and ruby-crowned kinglets, yellow-rumped warblers and song sparrows were singing. A pair of belted kingfishers near the shoreline sand banks (Janet Montevicchi) were hopefully searching for a nest site.

The grand disentanglement of the TCH eagles can be seen on the VOCM News site (<https://vocm.com/2020/05/25/eagle-rescue-tch/>).

Woodpeckers are making a showing in the area. A striking yellow-capped male black-back woodpecker visited Carole Peterson and Michael Bruce-Lockhart's property by Mitchell's Pond. A vigorous male hairy woodpecker was loudly rapping its percussion progressions on a hollowed beam on an abandoned telephone pole by Neary's Pond where loons have been calling wildly in the early morning and evening.

A gray catbird was seen in Ramea on 8 May (Richard Northcott) and in early June two catbird fledglings were photographed in North Harbour St. Mary's Bay by Geri Dalton and Wayne Cowan. In Clarendville in early May a Baltimore oriole was well provisioned with suet and fruit at Elmer Ryzuk's feeder.

The ongoing nesting behavior is amazing— keep looking.

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