

Northeast Avalon Times February 2019

We should be celebrating seals not culling them
Birds I View
Bill Montevecchi



Harp Seal mother and pup on an ice flow off the Newfoundland coast (photo: Dave McKinnon)

I took my three seal oil capsules this morning and will take three more this evening. I started taking seal oil some years ago, when someone told me about a Labrador retriever that was having difficulty walking but after a few months on seal oil was running around Quidi Vidi Lake. Being a sucker for a good story and a runner, I bought in and haven't looked back since.

Though seal oil could be the best source of health-giving omega-3 fatty acid of any capsule product, when I travel to the US and Europe, I carry them covertly as it is illegal to take any marine mammal product across these borders.

My family and I are also well endowed with seal skin mitts, boots and paraphernalia. Many friends in other countries would love to get their hands on these products. Yet the anti-sealing lobby has won the day, and killing of a seal for clothing, food and health benefits is frowned upon in most developed countries.

There doesn't appear to be much we can do, but we are not powerless, and we can act. Sealing is well supported in Newfoundland and Labrador, but we can raise that support to a much higher level,

Local perspectives of seals

Beyond directing attention to the tirades of the anti-sealing lobby, we can reconsider our own attitudes toward seals. Far too often we are bombarded with local claims that there are too many seals and that we need to cull them to balance the ecosystem.

There aren't too many seals, and we are much better damaging the ecosystem than balancing it. The magnificent ice-dependent herds of harp seals in the northwest Atlantic and Gulf of St. Lawrence are among the most spectacular wildlife wonders in the world - an arctic analogy to the tropical wildebeest migrations in the African Serengeti. Friends and folks I know who hunt seals aren't likely to want to guide tourists to see seals on ice ... but some might.

As a sustainable strategy, we needn't consider sealing and seal tourism as mutually exclusive possibilities. Our turr hunt is the only legal non-aboriginal hunt for migratory seabirds in North America, yet we gain massive economic and cultural benefits from tourists who flock to our seabird reserves at Cape St. Mary's and in Witless Bay, and keen birders come in winter to view murre, dovekie and arctic gulls. We just don't hunt and tour in the same places at the same time.

There are high end harp seal watching tours in the Magdalen Islands (Quebec) – a sealers' bastion. The possibilities here are profound yet simply unexplored but why?

Could it be due to a pervasive negative and outdated perspective of the seals? I think it is.

The reason that there are too few fish in the ocean has nothing to do with seals and everything to do with us. Our fisheries like those everywhere overfish stocks to commercial extinction and at times to biological extinction. When this occurs as it does frequently, we take advantage of nature's resiliency and switch to other species and repeat the process. But this cannot go on forever, it is not sustainable. As a National Sea trawler fleet commander told me a few years before the moratorium – "We know where they [the cod] all are and we can get all of them." We have to govern our fishery technology or it will govern us as it has with northern cod.

My biggest concern about negative attitudes is the call for culls among seal hunt supporters. Culls don't work – marine food webs are too complex to anticipate simple one off effects. Given that this is what we know from scientific evidence, isn't time to stop the banter about killing seals to save the cod?

There are so many more positive options to explore. Aboriginal people in B.C. are seeking seal hunting options to meet and generate restaurant interest. A friend who works with first nations in Saskatchewan has suggested seal meat exchange and commerce could be immensely beneficial on many levels.

Each spring I head to the St. John's waterfront to purchase seal carcasses. Some we roast but most we prepare for our huskies who relish it. So why can't we consider pet food options food as well. Our dogs and cat eat beef and chicken and we do too – no problem on that front.

By focusing on positive attitudes toward seals, we can embrace a proactive ways forward with exciting options that we rarely or never consider. It's time to take the blinders off and see the magnificent wildlife with which we are gifted and entrusted.

Birds in the Area

In early January, two male ring-necked pheasants were seen on Bell Island (Nick Montevecchi). The birds are no doubt escapes from a local farmer or bird fancier. At times pheasants have survived one or two of our winters.

Nick Easton of Carmanville informed me of banded thick-billed murre that his friend Jamie Keough shot in January on northeast coast. The bird was banded on Coates Island in the arctic in 1984 – making it 34 years old. I sent this information to thick-billed murre expert Tony Gaston in Ottawa who informed me of a 36 year old banded murre bird that was recovered last fall by Joanna Pohl of St. Anthony. One can only wonder how much longer they might have lived.

Eric Button and bird-watchers in the Gander area are concerned about a decrease in sharp-shinned hawks, as very few are showing up at winter feeders. I too am surprised by seeing but a single hawk that at our feeders all winter, but a quick check of the recent Christmas bird counts showed reasonable numbers of sharpies seen.

These hawks are stealth hunters, and glimpses are rare and special. There is evidence that they are in the area. On Tucker's Hill in St. Phillips, Gordon Butt had 21 mourning doves at his feeder at the end of January. This is the highest number of doves that I know of in Newfoundland. And it appears the dove congregation also attracted a sharp-shinned hawk as evidenced by some feathers that Gordon found and identified in early February.

In late January, Don and Scott Diebel spotted a docile male black-backed woodpecker beside their driveway on Marine Drive. The male hairy woodpecker that is now resident at our suet feeder in Portugal Cove is also very approachable. In St. John's, Helen Forsey photographed a partial albino (or leucistic) dark-eyed junco with splotchy white coloration.

Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h] 695-5305 [c]. Birds I View columns can be found at http://www.mun.ca/psychology/montevecchi/public_outreach/birds_i_view/