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The problem with protected areas



Bird-watching in the Mistaken Point Ecological Reserve

Birds I View Bill Montevecchi

Blaming government for every problem is a default option in public discourse. Regardless, government is the best means we have for conflict resolution, and when matters go awry, conflict is inevitable.

The current confrontation regarding protected areas in Newfoundland is a telling case in point. Decades of systemic governmental irresponsibility for the intent, spirit and proper execution of the Wilderness and Reserves Act (WERA) has generated inevitable crisis.

Setting aside areas to accommodate wildlife and ecosystem processes involve social understanding and valuation. Protected sites provide life-sustaining

environmental services such as clean air, clean water and flood protection. They buffer and provide benchmarks for the ongoing and impending threats of climate change.

We know this. Though somehow we have lost our direction. The disconnect between our pervasive love of the outdoors and our dismal standing in the area set aside for protection compared to other Canadian jurisdictions is a national embarrassment.

How did this happen? Over decades WERAC (the Wilderness and Reserves Advisory Council) and the relevant administrative department saw its legislative mandate eroded to the point of irrelevance. Valuation, enthusiasm and commitment for protected areas waned.

Even in the heady days of deficit inflation spending by the Tom Marshall government [Charlene Johnson Minister of Finance], positions at the Cape St. Mary's and Witless Bay Ecological Reserves were terminated. Owing to staff shortages, monitoring of the Avalon and Bay de Nord Wilderness Areas stopped. We stopped providing adequate vigilance for the protected areas we held.

For something to be valued it has to be shown to be valued with action. The best way to do that is with a presence that commits and affirms value. Without staff coverage or least periodic on the ground attention, protected area designations devolve into paper exercises with little community stewardship and support.

The Lawn Bay Ecological Reserve protects a rare endangered nocturnal seabird (the Manx shearwater) that local residents essentially never even see. And despite a massive outpouring of enthusiastic community support for the reserve - 5 years after its designation there isn't even a single sign to acknowledge the reserve presence. Besides being on a map, what valuation or recognition is provided for local residents and visitors?

Conversely, whenever there has been staff presence/involvement (especially local presence) in a protected area, there is the greatest support and appreciation for protected areas. The Mistaken Point and Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserves are prime examples of community valuation, benefit and stewardship at its best.

Government committed an unforgiveable blunder when it removed the wardens from the Burnt Cape reserve in Raleigh on the northern peninsula. The rationale of course was facile economic "savings". WERAC's recommendation to retain the wardens was ignored.

When government pulled the modest funding, the Burnt Cape Ecological Reserve was a shining iconic flagship of environmental protection. It showed what a tiny protected area could provide to a community - protection of globally unique rare plants, a sense of ownership and stewardship, an educational school program to engender wonderment and involvement in our youth, tourism, local business activity. They had it all. That is - until government touted "saving" and beat the ever downtrodden environmental scapegoat.

Government turned its back on this partnership building exercise. The reserve essentially lost its protection. People in the community were frustrated and exasperated. Is there any wonder that residents of the northern peninsula distrust government's handling of protected areas?

Their reaction was clarified for me during a recent seminar at MUN on WERAC's "A Home for Nature" (<https://www.engagenl.ca/engagement-initiatives/home-nature-protected-areas-plan-island-newfoundland>) given by former WERAC co-chair Victoria Neville. Charlene Brake, a key voice in the facebook group "Fight Back against WERAC", used the circumstances at Burnt Cape as an example of why people don't trust government. She actually said that the problem is with government not with WERAC. I agree. I resigned from WERAC because I did not want to be complicit with government spin and inaction regarding protected areas.

So what is the problem with protected areas? Revolving door ministerial positions enable politicians with minimal experience and often little commitment to the responsibilities of their portfolios. And in a system of hierarchical ministerial positions, the environmental portfolio ranks near the bottom. Plagued with systemic inadequacies, the process is dysfunctional. We need new vision, clarity, presence.

Given these circumstances, how can an advisory group like WERAC be heard and taken seriously by government? The problem with protected areas is basically that protected areas are taken for granted. They not adequately protected and for the most part they are little valued. It doesn't have to be this way and given the climate crisis threatening life as we know, it cannot go on this way.

Birds in area

Eastern coyotes are prowling Cape St Mary's as evidenced their droppings of scat containing feathers all along the trail to Bird Rock. On 3 October Kyle d'Entrmont and I found the skin and skeletal of a large pre-fledging gannet chick. No doubt many others have been killed.

Sherry Green is continuing to rescue and release storm-petrels stranded on the wharves at Bay de Verde. It during autumn that the juveniles leaving their nesting burrows for the first time are attracted to coastal lights and to brilliantly lit boats and offshore oil platforms (https://www.mun.ca/psychology/montevvecchi/public_outreach/Leachs_Storm-Petrel_Poster_cpaws.pdf). The management of the Quinlan Fish Plant is helping to mitigate the light attraction by turning off their building lights.

Two merlins flying in tandem along the sandy shoreline of Musgrave Harbour were in search of unsuspecting shorebirds in late September (Janet Montevvecchi). A stunning pair of gray jays visited our yard in Portugal Cove removing bread that had been set out for the blue jays and crows.

A flock of 8 grackles were feeding on the bountiful apple harvests at Sam and Isabell Winsor's in garden in Noggin Cove. Rose-breasted grosbeaks are being seen in

the area. Kyle d'Entremont uncovered a male and female at the Red Head River between North Harbour and Branch on 3 October.

Keep looking the birds are on the move.

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Birds I View columns can be found at
http://www.mun.ca/psychology/montevecchi/public_outreach/birds_ir_view/