

A Muskrat Falls decision

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Spirited Red-breasted Nuthatches are visiting many feeders for black oil sunflower seeds (photo Bill Montevecchi)

Like so many people, I have been totally conflicted in trying to make a personal decision about the Muskrat Falls development. The conflict stems from the way the present government goes about doing the people's business. Their in-your-face abrasive tactics and condescending close-minded perspectives don't feel right.

This is the government from which it is almost impossible to obtain information on any subject whatsoever but one which has deluged the public with promotional propaganda and infomercials regarding the Muskrat Falls development. Yet when asked to stand their ground for an open public debate in the House of Assembly, they will have no part of it. We can also take heart in the endearing endorsements of the Prime Minister and Minister Penashue – politicians who have done so very little for our province and country in terms of environmental protection and the safety of our people at sea. The entire process can only be described as self-destructive.

Consequently, I almost feel loath to admit that I think the Muskrat Falls is likely a reasonable development for Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Cons

There are many reasons to oppose the development. Environmental and economic concerns loom large. There are critical questions yet to be resolved around

assessments of the routing of the transmission line. The independent review by the Public Utilities Board is being circumvented. And why has there not been a peep about energy conservation? Are we now immune to the idea of energy restraint? Has the more-is-better consumerism that is strangling the world blinded us to a greater harmony with our environment and ourselves? Why are all these things treated as being mutually exclusive when indeed they are not?

The Pros

It will certainly be refreshing to remove the diesel-generating power plant at Holyrood. It will also be environmentally beneficial to for once and for all eliminate the race for destructive small hydro-dams that could choke every river in the province if developers had their way. Let us maintain these rivers for the salmon, for other wildlife and for the integrity of natural areas.

Wild Atlantic salmon and aquaculture don't mix

It is reassuring to see some direct statements from the head of the Salmonid Association of Newfoundland and Labrador and from SPAWN (Salmon Preservation Association for the Waters of Newfoundland) about lethal pressing dangers that open pen aquaculture holds for native Atlantic salmon. The comments are timely as they come just ahead of reports of another possible viral outbreak among farmed salmon on the south coast.

Industry spokespeople continually cloud the pervasive wildlife and environmental issues created by ocean-based salmon farming in untenable minimalist rationalizations that do not ring true. The problems that ocean-based salmon farms create for wild salmon are pervasive. They include contamination, the behavioural and genetic consequences of escaped farmed fishes, anti-biotics, sea lice, disease, pesticides and other pollution and problems created by aquaculture farms in prime wild salmon habitat. It all reminds of a statement by my friend and eminent fisheries scientist, the late Ram Myers who said that these developments should not be referred to farms at all but rather more accurately as industrial pollution sites.

There are environmentally better alternatives. But closed pen land-based salmon farming requires money and effort. Open pen salmon farming is profitable. And profit if nothing else tops all other concerns. Let the chips fall where they may, and if one looks the other way it's easier.

Birds in the area and around the province

On 12 November, Tony and Jannis Power spotted 28 gannets from their house above Beckford Cove in Branch. The warm-water influence continues, as is evident to those of us still wearing t-shirts in December in Newfoundland!

Early on the morning of 27 November, draped in a house coat Judy Gibson scurried from her home on the edge of Quidi Vidi Lake and recovered a stunning and stunningly dead male northern pintail from the shore. The duck was in perfect condition with no external marks or injuries. The bird will be tested for avian virus at MUN. Interestingly, the duck had been banded in Bowring Park in February by Greg Robertson of Environment Canada. The pintail likely bred elsewhere then returned to winter in St. John's near prime duck-feeding sites.

Winter migrant waterfowl are arriving. Tufted ducks and scaup have made their return to Burton's Pond, and the eiders are back at Cape St. Mary's (Tony Power).

Tear down paradise and put up a parking lot. A beautiful forested meadow adjacent to Butlers Pond next to massive road construction vehicle lot on Portugal Cove Road has gone the way of the dozer. The devastation disturbing for birds and depressing for humans. What a mess.

Peregrine falcons have been seen in Torbay (Robert White) and cormorants and bald eagles in Portugal Cove (Joyce Churchill).

By Neary's Pond a male and a female hairy woodpecker have been coming to Carolyn Mayo's feeder, where a sharp-shinned hawk has been checking out the diners. Just up the road, we have had rare visits by American goldfinches and gray jays.

Christmas

So this is Christmas. Like most of you I live in hope. Hope for saviors. Hope for sinners. Hope enriched and nourished by the wonders, vitality and resiliency of the natural world in which we are an embedded self-determining force. Such an incredible privilege can only be appreciated with the deepest of reverence.

Christmas is a time for reverence. Christmas is a time for reaffirmation of the powerful hope that can be delivered by a new born with an untold future in an amazing and wondrous world.

Merry Christmas and best wishes for a joyful holiday season with family and friends and for an enriching year to come. And for those who owing to circumstance may not be able enjoy the season – I wish for you the greatest of all gifts – hope. Godspeed.

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