

Northeast Avalon Times October 2013

Assessing impacts on the environment

Fraudulent credentials question scientific independence

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi

“The birds they sang at the break of day
Start again I heard them say

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.”

“Anthem” Leonard Cohen



Chickadees and other songbirds depend on their auditory abilities and acoustic environment for survival.

In 1990, it was good news for many when the Environmental Impact Study [EIS] for low-level jet flying in Labrador was approved. More good news soon followed with the creation of the Institute for Environmental Monitoring and Research (IEMR) to ensure environmental oversight, study and protection of wildlife with respect to military training exercises over the “Big Land”.

Dr. Louis LaPierre, the first K.C. Irving Chair in Sustainable Development at the University of Moncton was appointed as Director of IEMR. Throughout his career Dr. LaPierre had crafted an illustrious reputation, heading many commissions, institutes and resolving many difficult environmental decisions to the approval of governments and industries.

Dr. LaPierre's skills were not unrecognized nor unappreciated. He continued to rack up assignments and assessments. The good news stories no doubt played a part in his being awarded the Order of Canada.

The Environmental Impact Study (EIS)

To step back, the EIS was not all that rosy for independent scientists who critically reviewed it. Valued Ecosystem Components (VECs) were determined in terms of perceived economic and aboriginal considerations, so important species like caribou and salmon were included in the study's purview. Yet because ecological significance was undervalued, animals likely most vulnerable to sudden-onset noisy overflights - song birds whose nesting success depends on audition and vocal transmission were not even considered.

More critically, the EIS failed to rigorously assess the effects of low level supersonic jet flights on wildlife. This deficiency was extremely unfortunate, because unlike assessments of the potential effects of permanent developments like dams or mines, whose consequences cannot be assessed carefully before structural changes are embedded in the environment, the effects of low-level flying could have been tested before proceeding. Testing could have helped design an effective mitigation strategy or rejection of the proposal.

Conjectural models and arguments took the place of evidential experiments in the EIS. Many Technical Experts commissioned by the federal government found major deficiencies with EIS, so the project was not to proceed unless the deficiencies could be resolved.

Economic benefits and political priorities intensified pressure for EIS approval. Pressures overrode procedure, and the EIS was pushed through a biased bureaucratic process aided by consultants hired by Department of National Defense and Goose Bay.

The flawed \$17,000,000 EIS was approved. The IEMR was established, and the number of flights increased three-fold higher than the levels indicated in the EIS.

The IEMR Director, Dr. LaPierre is a proven master at stick-handling major environmental issues through what should have been rigorous assessments. Besides his IEMR involvement, Dr. LaPierre has championed reports, committees and commissions that have led to the reduction of forest buffers in the Irving forest farms of New Brunswick, approval of spraying a pesticide (fenitrothion) banned in the nearby USA, and a re-opening of the fracking considerations with the establishment of the New Brunswick Energy Institute that was praised lavishly by Premier Aylward. Dr. LaPierre has been described as providing the "seal of scientific credibility" for the fracking shale gas debate.

The crack

Someone, possibly a former student questioned Dr. LaPierre's educational credentials. Contrary to his resume, Dr. LaPierre did not hold a wildlife science Ph.D. from the University of Maine nor was his Master's degree in science. Searches have found only 4 peer-reviewed scientific papers by Dr. LaPierre. His misrepresentations of

his academic credentials and his weak record among his peers question the scientific veracity of his reports and recommendations.

Deeper questions are flagged about the necessity of truly independent scientific assessments in a democratic society. As corporate agendas overwhelm government regulatory responsibilities, scientists in Canada are being increasingly muzzled.

Following LaPierre's resignation as Director of the Energy Institute, the importance of such independence is reflected paradoxically in the New Brunswick Energy Minister's assurance "I'm confident that the individuals we have are the individuals that we need to have around the table to get the answers we're looking for".

As this column goes to press, Dr. LaPierre is the Director of the IEMR. Apparently, before the scandal broke, Dr. LaPierre tendered his resignation as of April 2014. Despite his scientific illegitimacy, Dr. LaPierre seemingly still holds considerable influence – the kind of sway that has been highly esteemed by his corporate and political sponsors.

Birds in area and around province

Persistent northerly gales during late September can generate seabirds "wrecks" at the bottom of Conception Bay. With the world's largest colony of millions of Leach's storm-petrels on Baccalieu Island at the mouth of the bay and the young leaving the nest at this time, these tiny seabird often suffer the brunt of wind-driven carnage.

Such was the case on September 27 when Bruce Mactavish estimated 20,000 storm-petrels struggling over Holyrood, along with thousands of phalaropes and hundreds of jaegers. The next day hundreds of dead storm-petrels littered the streets and parking lots. Storm-petrels have difficulty taking flight from flat ground; if found alive they are best held with toweling in a small box for nocturnal release from an elevated seaside site.

An injured juvenile gannet sought refuge in Portugal Cove (Steve Bruneau).

Seven double-crested cormorants and a juvenile great cormorant perched in Portugal Cove Harbour in mid-September reflect a locally growing population.

The month's rare bird excitement began one evening when Gerald Manning saw and Angela Duke emailed me images of an immature yellow-crowned night heron in Torbay. The news was posted on the Google bulletin board nf.birds and the next morning birders flocked to Torbay where the heron has taken up temporary residence.

Tony and Anjali Gaston encountered numerous rough-legged hawks along the Northern Peninsula highway, including one that pounced on a vole directly in front of their car.

Pam Williams photographed a covey of ruffed grouse in her yard in St. Philips. Gonadal recrudescence is inspiring white-throated sparrows to sing "O Canada".

In early October a mourning dove was seen on the telephone wire on St. Thomas Line.

Contacts = mont@mu.ca, 864-7673 (o), 693-5305 (c), 895-2901 (h)