

Save the seal hunt – let it be

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Harp seals are magnificent marine animals of the North Atlantic. (Photo: Bill Montevecchi)

“When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me speaking words of wisdom - let it be.”

Lennon/McCartney

Raise the issue of the seal hunt is raised and up she goes. There are many opinions – some balanced and considered and some from illogical extremes on both sides of the issue.

I have always been fascinated by and supportive of the seal hunt and in the late 1970s signed up as a member of the Canadian Sealers’ Association. And though I never ventured out to the front or killed a seal, I have cooked and eaten some, have a terrific pair of elbow-length sealskin mitts from Labrador, and take omega-rich seal oil capsules daily.

It is not about short-term economics

Ryan Cleary (NDP MP) and John Furlong (CBC Fisheries Broadcast) have recently questioned the economics of the hunt and whether it is worth the collateral damage that the seal hunt can impose on other fisheries and economic sectors. The logical extension of their arguments is to ban the hunt. In this respect they both miss the mark by a wide margin.

We well know, the seal hunt involves much more than economics. Perhaps most basically, seal hunt is about making decisions about how we choose to live our lives in the natural environment. The clarity of such decisions is compelling in aboriginal perspective and hunts. Do we have now completely forsake wild food and animal products for synthetically grown and manufactured ones? Do we give up wild fishes for economically more viable farmed ones? The economics certainly favor this progression. Yet we have to question if such progression is the best and most sustainable way to proceed. Can we preserve a natural and respectful relationship with the animals and environment in which we are all dependent for survival?

These basic questions cannot simply be thrown out to the vagaries of the ever-changing market place.

It is not about a cull

Talk of banning of the hunt has also inflamed the negative and destructive perspective of the cull. There have always been lots of seals, and they have always eaten fish. They always will and this is as it should be.

The misinformed and misdirected micromanaging of seal culls is not a solution but rather mismanagement at its worst. The perspective of “if we can't take the seals, then just let's just slaughter them” to save the fishes is futile and profane. Such argument also flies in the face of what's needed to value and to sustain a productive and healthy seal hunt. You can't have it both ways.

You are what you eat

Are we now at a point in our cultural evolution whereby environmental ethics will be determined by urban dwellers, movie stars and other artificial moralists far removed (or so they think) from the sustenance of the natural world? Is wildlife now something that we are completely detached from?

And where are our triumphant gourmets and gourmands? Those multi-talented chefs who are reaping awards for creativity can prepare succulent potted cod, delicate ptarmigan, robust moose, rich caribou, zesty goat, stunning squid, mouth-watering Arctic snails and like, but not an appetizer and entre of seal items on their menu? What's up? Too pedestrian? Too outlandish? Too frightening?

Clean meat from a clean cold ocean, a meat oozing with omega oils – a fuel for good health and athletic performance. How can cardiac-arresting fat laden and growth hormone enhanced fast-food burgers win out?

High-end preparation and exorbitant price would very likely improve public interest, attraction and tastes. The culinary examples of voluminous. Price certainly

validates the worth at least among our local population of seal coats, boots, hats, mitts, etc.

A few years back I attended a meeting of marine scientists at the New England aquarium in Boston. There were scientists from the US, Australia, Europe and two of us from Canada. When I learned that our evening meal was to be held at a Legal Seafoods restaurant that had banned the purchase of Canadian fish because of our seal hunt, I suggested to the group that we not eat there. To my surprise and encouragement all of the marine scientists, many of whom work with marine mammals, at the meeting endorsed that suggestion.

When time for dinner came, accompanied by two US scientists I had pleasure to explain to the maître d' that we would not be keeping our dinner reservation for 45 people. I explained that we were deeply concerned that the CEO of Legal Seafoods had banned the purchase of Canadian fish because of the seal hunt that we supported. Did this really matter in the larger scheme of things? Maybe ... maybe not though the perplexed look on the maître d's face was rewarding, and we felt good about that decision.

Let it be

As always life and enterprise move through ups and downs - economic and other ones. Yet we need not subject ourselves to the whims of others. We can and we should live in ways that we are so privileged to live – close to and in harmony with the natural environment and all its creatures.

If no one else wants seal pelts for clothing, then let us wear it proudly. If no one else wants seal meat and seal products for consumption and health then let us use them wisely. Will this make a difference in the larger scheme of things? Maybe ... maybe not, but the affirmation of such commitment and privilege will be its own reward.

There is wisdom out there. Listen to Jim Wellman (Editor of *The Navigator*, and former CBC Fisheries Broadcast host) - he gets it right. Let it be.

Birds in the area and around the province

Another wayward dovekie was picked in Port aux Basques in mid-January and given a rapid release to sea. On Ramea, Richard Northcott noticed ravens and crows chasing and dispatching dovekies flying over the island. These tiny but noble “alke konge” or king auks as the Norwegians call them or bullbirds as we refer to them often have a rough time despite their regal standing.

Robust flocks of tufted ducks are occupying Burton's Pond. The mild weather has likely made it easy for belted kingfishers to over winter. January sightings have been made at Mundy Pond (John Jacobs) and Quidi Vidi Lake (John Lewis).

Red-breasted nuthatches are visiting feeders in the area, and Keith Taylor noted a first appearance at his feeder in St. Philips.

Keep looking. Email = mont@mun.ca, 895-2901 (h), 864-7673.