Plight of the Penguins

Stars of Happy Feet face decline in population as Antarctic climate warms

By Laura Leigh Davidson | December 13 , 2007

The majestic Emperor penguins, stars of the movie Happy Feet, are facing a serious decline in population. As the climate of their home on the Antarctic Peninsula gets warmer, the ice on which the penguins raise their chicks is literally melting away.

The Emperors are not the only penguin population under pressure. Chinstraps, Gentoos, and Adélie are all finding themselves pushed into a smaller area as arctic sea ice melts. Many colonies have decreased in population by 50 percent, according a report released this week by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

The report, Antarctic Penguins and Climate Change, also cites diminishing food supply as a reason for the decline in the penguins' population. The decrease in sea ice and overfishing in the area have led to a reduced number of krill—crustaceans that are the main food source for Chinstrap penguins. Increased competition for food makes it difficult for young penguins to survive.

". . .it seems these icons of the Antarctic will have to face an extremely tough battle to adapt to the unprecedented rate of climate change," says Anna Reynolds, Deputy Director of WWF's Global Climate Change Program.

Scientists believe the Antarctic Peninsula is warming five times faster than the average rate of global warming. Warmer winter temperatures and stronger winds mean that the penguins have had to raise their chicks on increasingly thinner sea ice. Because temperatures are warming sooner than ever, sea ice breaks off earlier in the penguins' breeding season. Many eggs and chicks have been blown away before they were ready to survive on their own.

"Having just returned from the Antarctic, I've witnessed what is happening to the penguins there," says Dr. Lara Hansen, Chief Scientist of WWF's Global Climate Change Program.

"The warming climate means warmer, wetter air and too much snow at the wrong time of year. Penguins have to wait for snow to melt and they are breeding later—much too late," she added. Hansen believes the competition for territory and food among the different species is "a recipe for disaster."

As WWF released its report on Monday, Dr. Hansen made a plea to the leaders meeting at the United Nations Climate Conference in Bali, Indonesia, this week. "The delegates. . . have a chance to protect Antarctica's penguins and many other species, but they must act now," she said.

The UN conference in Bali will come to an end on Friday. Negotiations over a new agreement on global warming have been the central focus, and reports say the debate has been intense. The European Union is pushing for an agreement that contains specific limits on the amount of pollutants that can be released into the environment by automobiles, factories, and power plants. The U.S. delegation is reluctant to enter into such an agreement at this time, and believe more negotiation is needed.