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# No barrier to emergence of bathyal king crabs on the Antarctic shelf

Richard B. Aronson<sup>a,1</sup>, Kathryn E. Smith<sup>a</sup>, Stephanie C. Vos<sup>a</sup>, James B. McClintock<sup>b</sup>, Margaret O. Amsler<sup>b</sup>, Per-Olav Moksnes<sup>c</sup>, Daniel S. Ellis<sup>a</sup>, Jeffrey Kaeli<sup>d</sup>, Hanumant Singh<sup>d</sup>, John W. Bailey<sup>d</sup>, Jessica C. Schiferl<sup>a</sup>, Robert van Woesik<sup>a</sup>, Michael A. Martin<sup>a</sup>, Brittan V. Steffel<sup>a</sup>, Michelle E. Deal<sup>a</sup>, Steven M. Lazarus<sup>a</sup>, Jonathan N. Havenhand<sup>e</sup>, Rasmus Swalethorp<sup>c,f</sup>, Sanne Kjellerup<sup>c,f</sup>, and Sven Thatje<sup>g</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Biological Sciences, Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, FL 32901; <sup>b</sup>Department of Biology, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL 35294; <sup>c</sup>Department of Marine Sciences, University of Gothenburg, SE-405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden; <sup>d</sup>Department of Applied Ocean Physics and Engineering, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Woods Hole, MA 02543; <sup>e</sup>Department of Marine Sciences–Tjärnö, University of Gothenburg, SE-452 96 Strömstad, Sweden; <sup>f</sup>Section for Oceanography and Climate, National Institute of Aquatic Resources (DTU Aqua), Technical University of Denmark, DK-2920 Charlottenlund, Denmark; and <sup>g</sup>Ocean and Earth Science, University of Southampton, Southampton SO14 3ZH, United Kingdom

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Cold-water conditions have excluded durophagous (skeleton-breaking) predators from the Antarctic seafloor for millions of years. Rapidly warming seas off the western Antarctic Peninsula could now facilitate their return to the continental shelf, with profound consequences for the endemic fauna. Among the likely first arrivals are king crabs (Lithodidae), which were discovered recently on the adjacent continental slope. During the austral summer of 2010–2011, we used underwater imagery to survey a slope-dwelling population of the lithodid *Paralomis birsteini* off Marguerite Bay, western Antarctic Peninsula for environmental or trophic impediments to shoreward expansion. The population density averaged  $\sim 4.5$  individuals  $\times 1,000 \text{ m}^{-2}$  within a depth range of 1,100–1,500 m (overall observed depth range 841–2,266 m). Images of juveniles, discarded molts, and precopulatory behavior, as well as gravid females in a trapping study, suggested a reproductively viable population on the slope. At the time of the survey, there was no thermal barrier to prevent the lithodids from expanding upward and emerging on the outer shelf (400– to 550-m depth); however, near-surface temperatures remained too cold for them to survive in inner-shelf and coastal environments ( $<200 \text{ m}$ ). Ambient salinity, composition of the substrate, and the depth distribution of potential predators likewise indicated no barriers to expansion of lithodids onto the outer shelf. Primary food resources for lithodids—echinoderms and mollusks—were abundant on the upper slope (550–800 m) and outer shelf. As sea temperatures continue to rise, lithodids will likely play an increasingly important role in the trophic structure of subtidal communities closer to shore.

biological invasion | polar emergence | climate change | predation | Southern Ocean

Climate change is substantially altering the composition and function of marine and terrestrial ecosystems (1–5). Polar-marine communities are particularly vulnerable to climate change, which at this point is the principal threat to their persistence (6). The near-absence of seasonal variation in sea temperature has led to the dominance of cold-stenothermal faunas, which have limited capacities to acclimate to rapid warming (7–9). At polar latitudes, cold-stenothermy and increasing physical disturbance will shift and reduce the geographic ranges of high-latitude marine taxa, increasing their risk of extinction (10–12).

Globally accelerating temperature increases are already having profound effects on polar ecosystems. Those impacts extend beyond autecological responses to include top-down and bottom-up effects on marine food webs (13–17). The endemic faunas of the Antarctic continental shelf are now at risk of invasion by durophagous (skeleton-breaking) predators (18), a functional group that (based on the limited paleontological and genetic data available) may not have been ecologically significant there for as long as tens of millions of years (19–22).

“Reptant” (bottom-walking) decapod crustaceans, teleostean fishes, and neoselachian sharks and rays are key predators in shallow-subtidal communities worldwide but are at present physiologically excluded from nearshore environments in Antarctica (19). Reptant decapods, which include brachyuran crabs, anomuran crabs, and lobsters, typically cannot survive in waters colder than  $1^\circ\text{C}$ , although adult stages of some of the more cold-tolerant taxa can survive down to  $0.4^\circ\text{C}$  (23, 24). Their limited capacity to down-regulate naturally occurring magnesium ions in their hemolymph leads to paralysis and death at lower temperatures (25).

In the absence of durophagous predators, benthic faunas of the Antarctic shelf are lightly skeletonized and dominated by epifaunal suspension-feeders. The top predators are slow-moving invertebrates, such as seastars and nemertean worms. In some respects, therefore, Antarctic-shelf communities are reminiscent of low-predation communities living in contemporary deep-sea habitats, as well as communities from shallow, Paleozoic environments (26–30). Now, as sea temperatures rise, the reintroduction of durophagous predators could radically alter the composition and trophic structure of the shelf-benthos in Antarctica (19, 20, 31).

Lithodid crabs (Crustacea: Decapoda: Anomura) are common in the deep sea globally, as well as in shallow waters at subpolar latitudes (32). Also known as king crabs or stone crabs, lithodids

## Significance

For tens of millions of years, cold conditions have excluded shell-crushing fish and crustaceans from the continental shelf surrounding Antarctica. Rapid warming is now allowing predatory crustaceans to return. Our study of the continental slope off the western Antarctic Peninsula showed that abundant, predatory king crabs comprise a reproductively viable population at 841- to 2,266-m depth. Depth profiles of temperature, salinity, habitat structure, food availability, and predators indicate that there are no barriers to prevent king crabs from moving upward onto the outer shelf at 400–550 m. A cold-water barrier above 200 m could be breached within the next few decades. Emergence of king crabs on the shelf could have catastrophic consequences for the unique seafloor communities of Antarctica.

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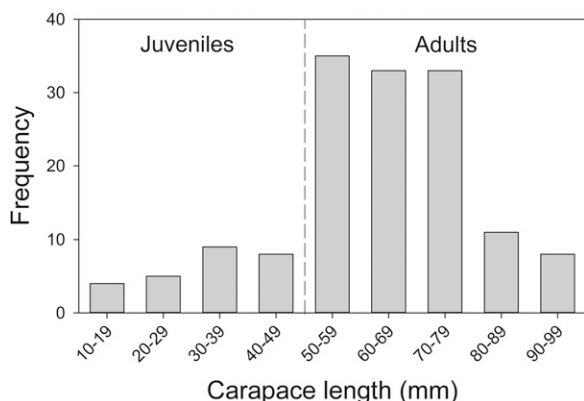
<sup>1</sup>To whom correspondence should be addressed. Email: raronson@fit.edu.

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**Fig. 3.** Carapace lengths of *P. birsteinii* imaged off Marguerite Bay, western Antarctic Peninsula ( $n = 146$  crabs that could be measured from the images; 1,075- to 2,266-m depth). Vertical dashed line denotes the maximum carapace length of putative juveniles.

temperatures at least as low as  $0.82^{\circ}\text{C}$  (49). Water temperatures on the upper slope (550–800 m) and lower (outer) shelf (400–550 m) were, therefore, within the known thermal tolerance of this species at the time of the survey, which was conducted in the austral summer. Temperatures in the austral fall and winter are generally greater than  $1.0^{\circ}\text{C}$  at shelf depths below 200 m off Marguerite Bay, because of localized intrusions of the Circumpolar Deep Water (CDW) and a general, multidecadal trend of shallowing of the CDW in the Bellingshausen Sea (41, 45, 50, 51). A cold-water barrier to lithodids remains at depths above 200 m, where Antarctic surface water and winter water typically keep ambient temperatures below  $0^{\circ}\text{C}$  year-round (41, 43). In contrast, cold Antarctic surface water can persist as deep as 500 m in parts of the Weddell and Ross Seas, suggesting that king crabs may be physiologically excluded from outer-shelf habitats in those locations (52). **Salinity.** Salinity ranged narrowly from 34.9 to 36.0 psu over a depth range of 385–2,285 m. Salinity generally does not drop below 34.7 psu at depths of 300 m or more (41). The range of observed salinities on the shelf and slope falls within the tolerances of lithodid crabs, including *P. birsteinii* ([www.iobis.org/mapper/](http://www.iobis.org/mapper/)).

**Sedimentary composition.** We assessed the substrate preferences of *P. birsteinii* by comparing the observed frequencies of sedimentary size-classes on the seafloor with the size-classes on which the lithodids were observed (Fig. 4A). The availabilities of four size-classes of sediment—fine-grained sediment, pebbles, cobbles, and boulders—were quantified in the depth range of maximum density of *P. birsteinii*, 1,100–1,500 m (Methods). The seafloor within that depth range was dominated by fine-grained sediment and pebbles (Fig. 4B). *P. birsteinii* in 1,100–1,500 m were found most frequently on pebbles, but a greater number were associated with cobble and boulder substrates than expected in the null hypothesis ( $G$ -test:  $G = 215.70$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) (Fig. 4A). There were no significant differences in the proportions of the four sedimentary categories between 1,100–1,500 m and 400–600 m (Fig. 4B) (Mantel test:  $r = -0.160$ ,  $P = 0.22$ ). Combining the distribution of *P. birsteinii* on the sedimentary categories at 1,100- to 1,500-m depth with the relative abundances of those categories at 400–600 m, we calculate that, absent other constraints, *P. birsteinii* has the potential to reach densities of  $4.5 \text{ individuals} \times 1,000 \text{ m}^{-2}$  within that depth range.

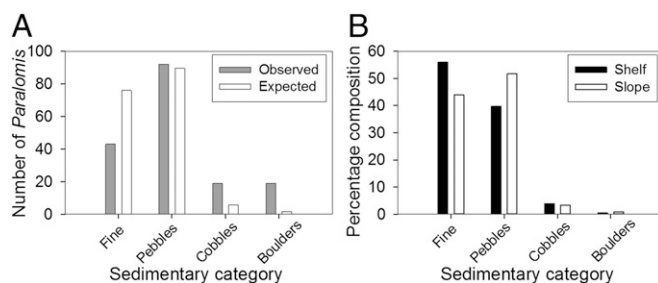
**Hydrostatic pressure.** We observed *P. birsteinii* at a minimum depth of 841 m on the slope off Marguerite Bay. The shelf-break off Marguerite Bay extends at least to 550 m, which is well within the known depth range of the species. *P. birsteinii* has been collected as shallow as 341 m on a seamount outside the Ross Sea (53), and other lithodids have been collected at 200 m or shallower off islands and seamounts surrounding Antarctica (23, 37, 54). Deep-

water lithodids can be maintained for months in the laboratory at atmospheric pressure without any noticeable adverse effects (55, 56). Hydrostatic pressure should not, therefore, present a barrier to *P. birsteinii* expanding onto the outer shelf off Marguerite Bay.

Many benthic invertebrates in Antarctica are eurybathic because the water column is uniformly cold. Ecological and evolutionary emergence of deep-water taxa in shallow water and submergence of shallow-water taxa in deep water are historical phenomena more common in Antarctica than at lower latitudes. These bathymetric shifts have been driven by glacial dynamics in the Neogene and have not been impeded by the effects of temperature or hydrostatic pressure (27, 57). Furthermore, movement of lithodids onto the outer Antarctic shelf—and shoreward as sea temperatures rise—would repeat their expansion onto the Patagonian shelf during deglaciation 10,000 y ago (20). Clearly the emergence of lithodids is physiologically and ecologically feasible. The acceleration of that emergence by anthropogenic climate change and the capacity of the lithodids for durophagous predation are features that would make their appearance on the Antarctic shelf ecologically novel and potentially transformative.

**Distribution of prey resources.** The availability of food resources across depths was evaluated by estimating the population densities of the known prey of lithodids visible in images taken 0.5–3.0 m above the substrate: ophiuroids, asteroids, echinoids, and gastropods. Potential prey that were not visible in the images, such as infaunal bivalves, could not be evaluated. The density of ophiuroids formed a unimodal distribution that peaked at 900–1,000 m (Figs. 1E and 2C). The overlapping tails of the depth distributions of ophiuroids and *P. birsteinii* suggested an inverse relationship (Fig. 2B and C). Asteroids, echinoids, and gastropods were more abundant at all shelf depths and generally more abundant on the upper slope than they were at 1,100–1,500 m (Fig. 2D–F), suggesting that predation by *P. birsteinii* may limit the distributions of these taxa. A similar disjunction in depth distribution of *N. yaldwyni* and echinoderms was observed in Palmer Deep (40), and *C. opilio* and ophiuroids were distributed in a complementary pattern in the Chukchi Sea (47). Considering the generality of diet in lithodids and their predilection for echinoderms and mollusks, there is no reason to expect that the population of *P. birsteinii* would be food-limited were it to expand to the outer shelf.

**Predation pressure.** Potential predators of benthic decapods include fishes, marine mammals, cephalopods, and other crustaceans in temperate, tropical, and Arctic marine ecosystems. The demersal fish fauna of Antarctica is comprised almost exclusively of three taxa of teleosts: the suborder Notothenioidei, distributed primarily in shelf environments; the family Zoarcidae on the slope; and the family Liparidae on the deep slope and continental rise. Fishes



**Fig. 4.** Sedimentary composition and preferences of the lithodid crab *P. birsteinii* along the western Antarctic Peninsula. (A) Observed and expected frequencies of *P. birsteinii* on different sedimentary categories on the slope (1,100–1,500 m;  $n = 173$ ). Expected values were calculated assuming the crabs showed no preferences for sedimentary categories. (B) Sedimentary composition on the continental shelf (400–600 m) and slope (1,100–1,500 m). Frequency data were converted to percentages for ease of comparison ( $n = 3,000$  for the shelf;  $n = 6,000$  for the slope).

were rarely observed along the transects (58). Based on biomechanical analysis of the demersal teleosts, limited durophagous feeding is possible in notothenioids and zoarcids, but not in liparids (59). Some teleostean taxa might be capable of preying on the demersal larvae or juveniles of *P. birsteinii*, but the few data available on their diets, distributions, and feeding biomechanics suggest that these fishes are not durophagous (59).

Nevertheless, published observations of predation on lithodids raise the possibility that their emergence onto the shelf may not be risk-free. The Antarctic toothfish *Dissostichus mawsoni*, a nektonic notothenioid, occasionally preys on lithodids at subantarctic latitudes, especially species such as *P. birsteinii* that lack spiny exoskeletons; *P. birsteinii* have been identified in the stomach contents of toothfish (54). Although *D. mawsoni* are present in the depth range in which we observed *P. birsteinii*, they are extremely rare at all depths off Marguerite Bay (58) and are unlikely to pose a threat. Similarly, although skates (Rajidae) and larger octopods potentially could feed on *P. birsteinii* in outer-shelf and slope habitats, they appeared only rarely in our images. Neither octopods nor skates play a significant role in Antarctic food webs (19).

Seals, which feed primarily on fish, cephalopods, and krill, could also prey on lithodids. Based on the diets of Antarctic seal species, the most likely candidates are Weddell seals, *Leptonychotes weddellii*, and southern elephant seals, *Mirounga leonina*. Weddell seals are known to feed on small crustaceans and can dive to at least 726 m, although their depth range is generally on the order of 100–200 m (60, 61). Male elephant seals, which dive to an average depth of 500 m, occasionally feed on benthic crustaceans (62). Neither species of seal is likely to pose a significant threat to *P. birsteinii* on the outer shelf.

We estimated predation pressure on the population of *P. birsteinii* by assessing the extent of sublethal damage, in the form of missing or regenerating chelipeds and walking legs. Injuries to limbs were rare: of 347 *P. birsteinii* that could be assessed from the images, 31 individuals, or 8.9%, displayed one or more damaged limbs. Of the 2,776 limbs of these animals that were visible in the images, 34, or 1.2%, were damaged. This latter incidence of damage was low compared with temperate decapods [e.g., 22.8% in the blue crab *Callinectes sapidus* (63)], despite lower regeneration rates in colder, Antarctic waters. The incidence of damage in *P. birsteinii* was also low compared with the lithodid *Paralithodes camtschaticus* in the Arctic [16.1% incidence (63)]. Chelipeds are often damaged in mating and other intraspecific interactions, so the low percentages for *P. birsteinii* probably overestimate the frequency of interspecific, sublethal predation. Regardless, the low level of sublethal damage and the paucity of potential predators strongly suggest that both sublethal and lethal predation events are rare.

## Conclusion

We found a reproductively viable population of the lithodid crab *P. birsteinii* resident on the continental slope off Marguerite Bay, western Antarctic Peninsula. Although the history of this population is unknown, its contemporary ecology supports the idea that bathyal lithodids could expand upward within a few decades. Depth profiles of water temperature, salinity, sedimentary composition, and the availability of prey, as well as the general absence of predators, indicate conditions favorable to upward expansion of *P. birsteinii* in this location, at least as shallow as the lower depths of the continental shelf. *P. birsteinii* would likely have a pervasive impact on the resident shelf-benthos, as lithodids do in other low-temperature environments around the world. Long-term ecological monitoring off Marguerite Bay and additional locations around Antarctica will be the only way to test rigorously the hypothesis of an imminent or ongoing expansion of lithodids into shelf habitats (37). Our study provides the initial data for such a long-term study.

Declining temperatures in the Southern Ocean after the Eocene drove benthic communities on the Antarctic shelf from a typically Cenozoic structure and function to the retrograde, quasi-

Paleozoic character they exhibit today. Anthropogenic climate change is now rapidly rewarming the Southern Ocean, potentially reversing this trend. At present rates of warming, lithodids should be able to survive in inner-shelf and coastal environments (above 200 m) within several decades. Emergence of predatory lithodids on the continental shelf could be a critical step toward remodernizing benthic communities in Antarctica and functionally homogenizing them with benthic-shelf communities at lower latitudes. Such changes would fundamentally alter the Antarctic benthos and diminish the global diversity of marine ecosystems.

## Methods

A photographic survey of the continental slope and shelf off Marguerite Bay was conducted from the RV *Nathaniel B. Palmer* in early December 2010 during National Science Foundation cruise NBP10-05. Eight transects, averaging 9 km in length, were imaged within a 100 × 100-km study site (Fig. 1 and Table S1). Transects covered the outer continental shelf, slope, and rise from 385- to 2,285-m depth. Images of the seafloor were obtained using the towed camera-vehicle SeaSled, which is owned and operated by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Woods Hole, MA (58, 64). SeaSled was equipped with two cameras (each 1.4-megapixel, or 1,360 × 1,024 pixels), two strobes (150 w-s), an acoustic-Doppler current profiler (1,200 kHz; Teledyne RD Instruments), a depth sensor (Paroscientific), and a CTD (Seabird SBE-49 Fast CAT 16-Hz). Two overlapping, strobe-lit images were collected every 3 s at an average altitude of 3 m above the substrate. The altitudinal range of usable images was 0.5–6.0 m above the substrate.

**Density and Size Estimates.** Densities were estimated for *P. birsteinii* and four taxa of benthic prey: ophiuroids, asteroids, echinoids, and gastropods. Image clarity was reduced with increasing altitude from the seafloor, and all images collected at an altitude above 6 m were discarded. The remaining images, which comprised 38,018 image pairs, were pooled, divided into 100-m depth bins, and used to estimate the density of *P. birsteinii*.

A density estimate was calculated for *P. birsteinii* within each depth bin in each transect. For each depth bin, the number of crabs in each transect was divided by the total area covered by the images from that transect within that depth bin, corrected for the overlap of the image pairs and between adjacent image pairs along the transect. The planar area of each image was determined trigonometrically from its dimensions and the altitude of the camera. The mean density of crabs per 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> and the 95% confidence intervals within each depth bin were calculated assuming a Poisson distribution, because the crabs were rare in the images.

The potential prey were smaller and more abundant than *P. birsteinii*, and accurate density estimates could only be obtained from images taken at a maximum altitude of 3 m. Densities were estimated using 250 randomly selected images from each depth bin, with the exception of 1,400–1,500 m and 1,500–1,600 m. Only 132 and 71 images, respectively, were available at altitudes of 3 m or less in those depth bins. The 95% confidence intervals were calculated assuming the prey taxa were normally distributed within each depth bin.

Where possible, the carapace lengths of the lithodids were measured based on the dimensions of the area captured in the image, using the software package Coral Point Count with Excel extensions (65). Measurements were only recorded for individuals observed on a horizontal plane and for which the entire carapace could be seen, at a maximum altitude of 3 m (i.e., the carapace and appendages had to appear symmetrical in the image).

**Assessment of Benthic Habitat.** Temperature and salinity data recorded 1–6 m above the seafloor were pooled from all transects and averaged at each 50-m depth mark, from 400 to 2,250 m. For each 50-m depth mark, *z*, the temperature and salinity data from  $z \pm 10$  m were used.

The composition of the substrate was determined for the shelf (400–600 m) and slope (1,100–1,500 m) using 100 randomly selected images from a maximum altitude of 3 m from each 100-m depth bin. Fifteen points were randomly placed on each image within a standardized 1-m<sup>2</sup> plot using Coral Point Count with Excel extensions. The grain of sediment beneath each point was measured and classified into one of four size-categories: fine-grained sediment (grain-size < 4 mm), pebble (4 to <64 mm), cobble (64 to <256 mm), or boulder (≥256 mm). In a pilot study using different numbers of random points, we determined that 15 points per image were sufficient to make accurate assessments of coverage of the different size-classes of sediments. Each *P. birsteinii* photographed from a maximum altitude of 3 m was also analyzed to determine the size-class of sediment beneath it. A G-test was used to compare the observed frequency of *P. birsteinii* on each size-class of sediment to the frequency expected under the assumption that they had no grain-size preference. The proportions of sedimentary size-classes between the shelf and slope were compared using a Mantel test.



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