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Of Penguins and People: The Antarctic Food Web in the Anthropocene

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The only thing that tourists to Antarctica are guaranteed to see are penguins. About 70,000 people traveled as tourists to Antarctica this year, and there is a small and rapidly growing tourism industry of ships taking them there. Yet tourism to Antarctica is unsettled in multiple ways; it is simply not like other touristic spaces, or as Bruner (2004) would call them, "borderzones." This is a space that is not controlled by a nation-state, but instead regulated by the Antarctic Treaty System which protects the continent for science and peace (no weapons are allowed there, for example).

There is no "local" population in Antarctica; humans only temporarily reside there in research stations or on expedition ships. The physical environment of Antarctica is itself being literally unsettled by the affects of global climate change, as ice sheets melt and glaciers calve into the sea.

In the Antarctic Peninsula, where the southern-most tip of the Andes towers above seas of ice, tourists come *to be* unsettled. On the ten-day expedition in 2018 where I conducted an ethnography, many talked about how their friends couldn't understand why they would want to go there, where there's no restaurants, museums, shops, or beaches. And yet they all relish the quiet vastness, describing it as "pristine" and "untouched." For many, this was literally the seventh continent they had visited. For the majority, it was certainly a trip that came after many, many international trips.

Both tourists and their expedition leaders were quite clear on the point that this is *not* a cruise (I was corrected when I slipped up on this point). This was an expedition, and so one should expect some discomfort, unexpected changes in plans due to weather or other factors, and that nothing was guaranteed (except, perhaps, penguins).

Wildlife is one of the major attractions of Antarctica. In addition to the spectacular landscape, a lot of time is spent watching birds, whales, and seals. On-board lectures, presented by expedition staff who are largely naturalists. These focus on educating tourists about the local ecology, distinguishing types of birds, and human impacts on the continent through global warming and microplastics. Most of these lectures take place during the trip across the Drake Passage. Despite the often-rough seas and seasickness, most passengers attended these lectures.

What I want to talk about today is how tourists' understandings of the local ecology and food web is complicated – dare we say, “unsettled” – by their relationship with penguins. Much of what tourists learn about Antarctica focuses on the local food web. The foodweb Antarctica can appear less complicated than it might in other spaces, although this is an illusion due to most of it being in the ocean. The base of the foodweb is formed by krill and small marine crustaceans. These are consumed by penguins, whales, seals, squid, and bird such as albatrosses. But penguins are also themselves prey to many other species, including leopard seals, orcas, and sharks, and their eggs and chicks are prey for other birds such as skuas and petrels.

Despite their radically different positions of penguins and tourists in the food web – the latter are definitely not prey in any sense – these humans nevertheless identify closely with penguins. In the context of tourism in Antarctica, they were often treated as the Antarctic equivalent of people, a “local population” if you will. Human travelers often compared themselves to penguins. It was common for tourists to talk about how penguins looked like small people, and also how they themselves must appear to be “big red penguins” to the birds. (Red, because that was the color of the parka that the company issued to passengers and that most tourists wore.) Penguins waddled from nesting areas to the sea over “penguin highways” that humans are prohibited to walk on. Once in the ocean, penguins move gracefully, “purpoising” like dolphins, but their waddling on land gives them a human-like appearance, and makes them far easier to observe. In fact, tourists seeing penguins alone on floating ice would sometimes comment that the lone bird must be “lost,” while guides would correct this anthropocentric assumption by saying the birds are quite literally “at home” on the ice.

This kinship meant that people often took the “side” of penguins when they witnessed moments of tension between animals. Tourists never intervened (this would have been strictly prohibited anyway), but if skuas were attacking penguin nesting areas, for example, tourists would often audibly root for the black and white birds over the flying ones. Tour guides would sometimes remind them that skuas also had chicks to feed, but this largely fell on deaf ears. It was understood on a rational level, but did not affect the emotional affinity many tourists had towards penguins.

Meanwhile, tourists were inhabiting the role of apex-predator on their expedition ship, or as it's more commonly called, elite cosmopolitan dining. An on-board restaurant that operated much like land-based restaurants. Meals were served with clockwork regularity: breakfast, lunch, tea, and dinner. The food served was so frequent and generous that after a few days, ship-wide announcements about mealtimes were often met with good-natured laughter. (“What, are we eating again?!”) While there was a single dining room that operated much like a land-based restaurant, with a combination of menus and buffets and a variety of options. The international kitchen staff prepared meals with a keen understanding of the preferences of an older U.S. market. On entering the dining room for each meal, a table was laid out with prepared plates of the meal options, with captions, over a white tablecloth. These included mixed salads, crudites with hummus and guacamole, and main dishes such as baked sweet potato with spicy vegetable lentil ragout, braised lamb shank, fillet of pollock, and steak. There were also vegetarian, gluten-free, and sugar-free options for those with restrictions, but there were large quantities of fish and meats served. Desserts had an English flair, with custards, sticky toffee pudding, and coconut rice. Fresh fruits and vegetables were common, and coffee and wine flowed freely. In short, the food offered these travelers was radically over-abundant.

This is in stark contrast what tourists learn about the “Antarctic food” of human residents of the continent, especially early to mid-20th century explorers and researchers. Consider Port Lockroy: half-gift shop, half-museum dedicated largely to food. Used in the early twentieth-century as a harbor and whaling station (1911-1931), the buildings of “Base A” were constructed as Britain’s first permanent Antarctic station in 1944 and occupied until 1962. A plain brown building with red trim is set up on cement pillars, with the British flag flying nearby. Penguins nest under both, waddling around while people studiously avoid touching or even approaching them, per tourism regulations. The “Penguin Post Office” sends thousands of postcards a year, all stamped by hand, which take at least a month to arrive after being routed through the Falkland Islands to London, regardless of final destination. The Port Lockroy gift shop offers Shackleton quote magnets (of all Antarctic explorers, Shackleton is definitely the most visible), Antarctica tartan scarves, and stuffed penguin toys.

The adjacent museum is the scientific station, largely appears as if the men stationed there had just up and left. The tool room is fully stocked, tins of food are rusting in the larder, amateur pin-up girl paintings are peeling on the dorm walls. It was restored in 1996 and is now managed by the UK Antarctic Heritage Trust (UKAHT), which stations four volunteers there each tourist season (the southern summer, Nov-March). Port Lockroy claims to be Antarctica’s most visited tourist attraction.

Food and drink feature prominently here. In the Port Lockroy gift shop, visitors will find an Antarctic cookbook and Shackleton Whiskey. The official souvenir guidebook opens on the first page to a double-page color photo of the museumified larder with rusting tins of coffee, peas, apricots, oatmeal, and Horlicks (a hot drink from the UK made of malted wheat and barley). The food eaten in Antarctica by these British residents and other explorers is portrayed as meager, and either in unappetizing cans or hunted.

The animals living in Antarctica are, culinarily speaking, *ungrammatical* to western tastes (to invoke the concept of Mary Douglas). Port Lockroy’s gift shop offers a cookbook that gives us a glimpse of these recipes and the narratives surrounding them. *Fit for a Fid*, by chef Gerald Cutland (2011), was originally published in 1957. (A F.I.D. is an acronym for “Falklands Islands Dependencies Survey,” later renamed as the “British Antarctic Survey,” and refers to the men who were part of it.) Cutland offers a snarky, practical book for cooking with canned peas and penguin eggs. There is irony in today’s tourists buying such cookbooks (myself included, because how could I resist?). The prologue, written for the 2011 reprinting, says the recipes “no longer reproducible” (Baker 2011, ii). Obviously, the point of this book is not to learn how to cook, but to marvel at the deprivation and creativity of these men.

Cutland’s cookbook presents a strange mash-up of empire and isolation. Recipes regularly include dried coconut, as well as desiccated onions and carrots, canned peas, herring, salmon and various other tinned things. At the same time, large sections of the book devoted to making Antarctic mammals and birds palatable. While cormorant and seal brains are lauded as “Antarctic delicacies,” other meats – such as seal meat and penguin – are noted for their unpleasant smell. Cutland offers several tricks for removing the smell of these meats, including removing the blubber, blanching, hanging the meat for several days, and dressing it with beef suet during cooking. He finds penguin meat particularly repulsive, and offers a last resort if none of this works: “slip it out the nearest window!” (2011, 48) before moving reluctantly onto actual recipes for it.

Cutland explains part of his reticence to eat penguin this way: “I have the awful feeling inside of me that I am cooking little men who are just that [sic] too little curious and stupid” (Cutland 2011, 47). Indeed, the cover of his cookbook features an anthropomorphized penguin chef, carrying a plate with a stylized orca or fish (complete with line representing either steam or smell). Even an author telling you how to cook penguins sees them as something closer to human than other animals. Cutland’s ambiguous feelings about penguins are shared by other travelers I met in Antarctica. Although there was never any suggestion of them eating one, the idea that penguins might be prey for other animals invoked a slightly cannibalistic horror.

These unsettling connections forged between prey animal and cosmopolitan touristic diners mirror how tourists do and don’t talk about their relationships to Antarctica through global climate change. On the whole, these tourists agree that climate change is real and caused by humans. During interviews, I asked tourists what I hoped was a neutral question: “How do you feel about current climate change conversations?” Almost all responded with great concern about our current environmental predicament. Many blamed the U.S. government for not doing enough to combat this crisis (the majority were from the United States). Many offered that at home, they recycled or drove electric cars.

Only one person offered unprompted concern about the environmental impacts of the very trip we were on, and none commented on the impacts of their super-traveler lifestyle in general. None asked about the ship’s recycling programs, and only a few expressed curiosity about ship fuel standards or sewage issues. Some even prefaced their comments by saying they didn’t want to get “too political, but...” Climate change was a problem for the profane world of the everyday, not for the sacred space of vacations (Graburn 2012).

This kind of disconnect has been observed by other researchers. In her ethnography of a small town in Norway, sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard (2011) discusses the “double reality” of living in a context where global climate change is immediately evident in the fabric of everyday life, and where people nevertheless live their lives much as before. Although residents of this town knew that global warming was making local ice fishing dangerous and shortening the ski season, it was not often discussed nor the center of local political action. Norgaard argues there was a “social construction of denial:” not an individual process of *claiming* that climate change isn’t real, but rather a social project of *acting* as if it isn’t. Political parties excluded the issue of climate change from agendas as not a “local” issue; teachers were expected to temper conversations so that students don’t feel the situation is hopeless; friends tried not to bring down parties by talking about it.

This disconnect is precisely what I observed on the Antarctic expedition ship. Despite their grave concerns about global climate change, only a few tourists volunteered to me their concerns about how their own travels – to Antarctica, and more broadly – might be contributing to this problem. And the topic itself was considered far too controversial to be appropriate to discuss with fellow travelers at all.

Thus, the relationship between penguins and people is one of both connection and disconnection, one where the joy of imagined kinship is tempered by the largely unspoken understanding that one set of “little men” is destroying the habitat of the other.

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