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As ice melts, penguins starve to death

Almost half of Antarctic Peninsula's Adelie penguins were wiped out during the last century'



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A COLONY of Adelie penguins rescued Mumble the Emperor penguin in the animated Antarctic adventures of Happy Feet. But on the remote frozen continent, it is the two-foot

tall Adelies that now need a real rescue act.

These happy feet may be starving to death as melting ice reduces their staple diet of krill.

The population of endangered Adelie penguins has declined by nearly half during the last century, according to Ron Naveen, president Oceanites Inc, and principal investigator, Antarctic Site Inventory.

"When our work concludes, we will be producing the first century-long comparison of penguin and seabird populations in the Antarctic," Naveen told HT at the Thirtieth Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting he is attending in the capital. "Throughout the Antarctic Peninsula, the Inventory has recorded a decline in Adelie penguins and a rise in the number of Gentoo penguins."

This pristine wilderness holds seven penguin species: Emperor, King, Adelie, Gentoo, Macaroni, Chinstrap and the Rockhopper penguin. The Adelies with a white 'tuxedo shirt' front, white ring around the eyes and reddish beaks, were named after Adelie, the wife of a French explorer in the 1830s. When Adelie penguins mate, they first do a courtship dance.

"In contrast to the drastic drop in the Adelie population, the Gentoo population seems to be booming," said Naveen. "We suspect this is because of changing climate and food distribution."

When French explorer Jean Charcot visited the Petermann Island in 1909 he recorded 1,000 pairs of Adelie penguins and only 56 pairs of Gentoo penguins. "We now notice less than 500 pairs of Adelie penguins there though the Gentoo population is over 2,000," said Naveen. "Petermann Island is getting warmer faster than anywhere

else on the planet. During the last 57 years the increase in temperature has been by 5 degree centigrades."

That's why it is suspected that the Adelie population may be declining due to lack of food. While Adelie penguins survive only on krill or shrimp-like invertebrates that are key to the Antarctic ecosystem, Gentoo penguins eat both krill and fish. Baby krill survive under the ice and die if the ice melts. As global warming leads to higher temperatures and melting ice, the population of krill is decreasing, leading to less food for the Adelies.

The Island, six miles north of the Ukrainian Vernadsky Station, has produced the longest set (60 years) of continuous weather observations in Antarctica. Oceanites is a US-based non-profit science and educational foundation and its major scientific project is the Antarctic Site Inventory that began in 1994.



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TOP

