

# CULTURE CREATURES



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During the peak movie-going period of Christmas 2006, the blockbuster hit was not, as many people anticipated, the new Bond film, *Casino Royale*, but rather an animated musical about a tap-dancing Emperor penguin, entitled *Happy Feet*.

The lead character encounters a variety of Antarctic animals during his travels, including skuas, killer whales and an elephant seal voiced by Steve Irwin. Only a year earlier, another film about Emperor penguins had been an unexpected success: *March of the Penguins*, the second highest-selling documentary ever made. The intervening months had seen the release of *Eight Below*, a children's film about a group of huskies accidentally abandoned over winter at an Antarctic base, who must scrape by on petrels and washed-up killer whales (judiciously, they choose not to feast on the other hit Antarctic animal of the season).

Successful films starring animals are nothing new, but currently it is the combination of animals and Antarctica that is generating considerable public interest. While these films may be designed primarily as entertainment, they have sparked intense political debates. *March of the Penguins* created controversy in the US when the religious

right championed the film's subjects as models of proper parenting and proof of Intelligent Design. Environmentalists were frustrated by its failure to mention the threat that climate change posed to Antarctic wildlife. *Happy Feet*, by contrast, was criticised in some circles for wearing its environmental message on its sleeve.

While the recent flurry of films has raised the profile of Antarctic animals (particularly penguins) to an unsurpassed level, it draws on a rich tradition of cultural engagements with the continent's fauna. One of English literature's best-known works, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798), pivots on the mistreatment of an Antarctic animal – an albatross. Both native and introduced animals play central roles in famous narratives of Antarctic exploration: Apsley Cherry-Garrard's *Worst Journey in the World* revolves around a quest for Emperor penguins' eggs, and historians argue endlessly about the consequences of Robert

# Antarctic animals in popular culture

F. Scott's reluctance to use (and then eat) dogs in his fateful polar journey. More recently, Antarctic wildlife has become a popular topic of television nature documentaries, such as David Attenborough's *Life in the Freezer* (1993). The current craze for Antarctic animals is the latest episode in a long and complex cultural history.

How do books and films influence public attitudes towards animals in the far south? What kinds of stories do we tell about our encounters with animals in the Antarctic, and how have these stories changed over the last few centuries? In what ways do highly popular texts, such as *Happy Feet* and *March of the Penguins*, affect our treatment of Antarctic animals? To what extent might they impact upon policy decisions?

*Happy feet: emperor penguins and other Antarctic animals have inspired numerous films. How do these films influence our perceptions of these animals, our treatment of them and our policy decisions?*

An interdisciplinary team of researchers will be investigating these questions over the next three years as part of a project entitled *Creatures of the Ice: A Cultural Analysis of Human-Animal Relations in Antarctica*, funded by a \$137,000 Australian Research Council Discovery Grant. The team consists of Professor Helen Tiffin and myself, both from the School of English, Journalism and European Languages at the University of Tasmania, and Australian Antarctic Division biologist Dr Steve Nicol.

Professor Tiffin is an internationally known literary critic who, over the last decade, has turned her attention to representations of animals in literature and culture. I am a past recipient of an Australian Antarctic Arts Fellowship, and completing a book entitled *Fictions of the Far South: Imagining Antarctica*. Dr Nicol will act as a partner investigator in the project, providing expert scientific advice and suggesting ways in which the research might draw from and potentially feed into policy.

The project's scope is ambitious: we will survey a range of genres, including popular science books and articles; exploration accounts; diaries, published and

unpublished; travel narratives; feature articles in the media; documentaries and films; and literary texts. We will look not only at animals native to Antarctica, but also those that humans have (until recently) brought with them. Dogs have been an important part of human occupation in Antarctica, particularly in its initial stages, but the early explorers didn't stop there: ponies, cows, cats, rabbits, squirrels, pigs, guinea pigs and pigeons all went along for the ride. They played an important role in exploration, both as companions and as resources.

Animals are central to the human experience of Antarctica; surveys have shown that wildlife is the number one drawcard for tourists. However, most people will never see Antarctic animals in their native habitat. What they will encounter are highly mediated, textual representations of these animals on page and screen. By examining these representations, *Creatures of the Ice* aims to deepen our understanding of humanity's relationship with the Antarctic continent.

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Elizabeth with Adélie penguins during her 2003-04 Arts Fellowship.