

Handout-Plan A: Query to OnEarth magazine

Query I emailed on Feb. 16, 2011:

Query: *Antarctic Food Chain Lies in the Balance As Climate Change and Overfishing Threaten Krill*

Subhed: *Scientists and Nonprofits Push For Ecosystem Management Changes*

By Susan Moran

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Dark humor at Palmer Station stretches as far as the Marr Ice Piedmont glacier that glistens behind it on this outcropping of the Western Antarctic Peninsula. On some days Kim Bernard and her fellow krill researchers at the tiny U.S. research station call their inflatable boat *Psychokrillers* when they call into the station manager that they're leaving the dock to collect samples in the frigid Southern Ocean. In fact, their mission is very serious: they're trying to understand how populations of krill, the keystone species in the Antarctic food chain, have suffered more than a two-fold drop since the mid-1970s along the northern regions of the Western Peninsula.

Meanwhile, Jennifer Blum and her seabird research team are measuring changes in populations of some of krill's most charismatic predators—penguins. The data, at least in this region, look grim. For instance, the population of tuxedo-colored Adelie penguins has plunged from 15,000 breeding pairs in the 1970s to fewer than 3,000 today. The faded gray rings around the scattered slate-rock penguin colonies on islands near Palmer are vestiges of much larger colonies of years past. Many of them are moving farther south where colder temperatures have helped preserve sea ice cover.

Climate change-induced sea ice loss, as well as intensive commercial krill fishing (largely for salmon feed and Omega-3 supplements for humans), are the main culprits of this cascading effect on krill and their predators. The tiny crustaceans, especially juvenile krill, feed on algae that grows under sea ice. They also hide from predators in the crannies underneath the ice cover. Since 1950, sea ice cover has dropped by 40 percent, and the average annual period of ice cover has shrunk by 80 days.

The plight of krill is regional, not universal. "Krill resource is probably one of the most abundant in the world," says Gerry Leape, who directs the Antarctic Krill Conservation Program, an environmental arm of the Pew Charitable Trust in Washington, D.C. "But unfortunately, 94 percent of the fishing is near shore, so we're seeing stress on near-shore stocks." For commercial fishing boats, what's near shore is easiest and cheapest to catch.

Leape's program at Pew, along with several other conservation organizations and academic scientists are not against krill fishing itself, but rather a more precautionary approach to fisheries management. They have succeeded in prompting the fishing industry and its regulators to introduce some changes, including quotas, that are helping to stem krill declines. But the battle is hardly over. Over the next few months the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, which is part of the Antarctic Treaty System, will take up the issue.

The article I'd like to write would blend in-the-field science with policy and explore recent efforts to preserve Antarctic krill and the whole food chain they support.

As I mentioned before, I blogged for OnEarth's website during my 16-day stay at Palmer Station on a Marine Biological Laboratory fellowship. I could include an audio slide show focusing on the krill researchers at Palmer. Here are the krill and penguin blog posts I wrote:

<http://www.onearth.org/blog/antarctic-adventure-bottom-of-the-food-chain-plays-critical-role-at-the-bottom-of-the>

<http://www.onearth.org/blog/antarctic-adventure-petrels-penguins-and-climate-change>

Thanks, George, for considering the query. I'd be happy to brainstorm about an approach that would best serve OnEarth. I hope to work together soon on this, and down the road, other stories.

Susan

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Editor's initial reply, a "maybe," March 7, 2011:

Hi Susan –

Sorry for the delayed reply. ..

Interestingly enough, I had just begun a conversation with one of our authors about krill in the Antarctic. I do think it is a good story, although we hadn't got as far as discussing how to approach it. Let me think about this, talk to others here, and get back to you shortly.

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My followup email, sent March 30, 2011:

Hi, X,

I'm the journalist who contacted you a few weeks ago about an Antarctic krill/climate change story I'd like to write.

Here's a fleshed out query (attached and pasted below). I hope you're still mulling it as a possible feature. I've been "fishing" further into the topic since my trip to Palmer Station. It's very timely, important, and colorful.

Please let me know at your soonest convenience if you're interested. I'd be happy to talk, brainstorm, etc.

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Note: No replies after that, so I gave up and went to Plan B.