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Unhappy Feet: Fred's Experience with Americans in Antarctica

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The Beginning
After serving in the Marines for four years, I accepted a position at McMurdo Station in the Ross Sea region of Antarctica at the end of the world. I met many interesting people; yet, the most intriguing creature turned out to be Fred, an Emperor Penguin.

Penguins
Currently, there are seventeen known species of Penguin. Most of them are located in the Southern Hemisphere, along the coastlines of South America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and Antarctica. I had the pleasure of becoming acquainted with two species both of whom, like me, choose to brave the icy hellscape of the Antarctic Continent, the Adélie and the Emperor Penguins.



McMurdo Station
The Emperor Penguin is easily the most recognizable. Just saying the word "Penguin" conjures up the familiar image, four feet tall, sharply dressed with its black tuxedo jacket, the Emperor penguin proudly captures the imagination of people the world over. They are commonly found in two specific areas of Antarctica, the Ross Sea and Weddell Region, forming large colonies on the temporary sea ice in those areas. Most people will never have the opportunity to meet one of these majestic creatures in the wild. At McMurdo Station seeing the Adele and Emperor Penguins became a daily occurrence.



The Halfway Hut
As an Electronics Technician, I travelled frequently between the two active runways in the region, Pegasus and Williams fields. With Pegasus servicing heavy aircraft like C-17s, an inflatable pipeline is installed every year to make refueling the outgoing flights significantly easier. Because of this pipeline and its maintenance requirements, a pumping station exists at the halfway point between the two runways. A collection of cargo containers make up this midpoint and those of us on "the Ice" refer to it as the Halfway Hut.



The Place To Be
The most exciting thing about the Halfway Hut is that it attracts Penguins. They hide from the wind on the leeward side of the containers while they molt during the summer season. On one of my trips to Pegasus, I first encountered Fred who soon became my friend.

Between the two of us he is obviously the better dresser. By all accounts, he had been visiting the Halfway Hut for at least five years. He seemed like the pathfinder of his waddle (a group of Penguins). Fred arrives seven to ten days before the rest of his party.



The Loophole
Fred, just to my left, appears to be unsettled as noted by his wing gesture. It is important to note that according to policy, I am too close to the waddle. International law states that if a human is close enough to cause a reaction in the Penguins, the human is too close. With that in mind, I did not approach them. I remained still. I stood still and their natural curiosity brought them to me.

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Leave No Trace
"Leave No Trace" is a series of laws that has been put in place by the United States Antarctic Program (USAP). The central idea is that if humans were to suddenly no longer exist in Antarctica, the environment and the animals that live there should be able to resume their lives as if we had never been there in the first place.

Fred's presence at the halfway hut is a direct contradiction of these policies. This animal has adapted to the American presence, especially during its thirty-four-day molting period. Fred marches inland and utilizes the Halfway Hut to shelter itself from the deadly winds of Antarctica. This has been noted as Fred and his waddle move around the cargo containers as the winds shift sheltering themselves on the leeward side.

The Old Way
Old practices around the station have led to some interesting decisions. According to legend, a mound in front of the power plant was originally created by burying a large amount of sausages that were unpopular with the naval staff at the time. This spot became known as "Sausage Point." While the sausages were eventually removed and disposed of properly, it is clear to see that the idea of leaving no human trace behind is a relatively new way of thinking when dealing with the Antarctic continent.

Human Impacts
As the climate changes, it is forcing the typically shore bound Penguins further and further inland in search of shelter. This is occurring because of human influenced climate change. Fred and his friends normally would have used the rocks and boulders along the shoreline to shelter themselves. Instead, they have formed a symbiotic relationship with the Americans and the cargo containers. They are not the only ones affected. The scavenging Skua birds migrate to McMurdo Sound during the Austral summer. Countless Skua sit on the powerlines and the edges of buildings. They wait for food to be dropped. While USAP participants are not allowed to do anything to prevent this from occurring, the simple fact that these birds have learned that humans are a source of food is deeply troubling and suggests that USAP policy needs revision.

The End
As the years go by, Fred's waddle continues to expand at the same time that the sea ice collapses causing the waddle to venture further on to the ice. They are now following new human roads and pipelines. Despite the danger, Fred and his waddle steadfastly follow the humans into an unknown future.

