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They're just like us

Penguins are a hit at the box office. That's because they produce profound feelings of joy in humans

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We expect film stars to be graceful and elegant, not waddling and ungainly. We imagine them manicured and perfumed, not oily-feathered and smelling of fish. But this season's stars are more used to the icecaps than the red carpet. *March of the Penguins* is this year's surprise film hit in the United States. Today it is shown at The Times bfi London Film Festival, and the pundits are expecting it to be a smash here too. Having already taken \$75 million (£42 million) at the US box office, it has become the second-highest grossing documentary. Four months after its release, it is still taking \$250,000 every weekend.

This 80-minute French documentary follows a flock of emperor penguins on their epic journey across the Antarctic to reach their breeding grounds — a tale that, narrated in the warm, resonant tones of Morgan Freeman, appears remarkably human. It's an inspiring story of endurance, love, fidelity and sacrifice for one's children — all played out against biting winds and freezing ice. Audiences love it.

In the United States political forces have been quick to capitalise on the film's success. Right-wingers have proclaimed the film the perfect morality tale, illustrating the importance of family values and self-sacrifice. They have also cited penguins as an example of intelligent design; the idea is that God must have had a hand in creating such a wonderful creature. One minister from Ohio has even recommended that Christians take a pen, paper and torch to the cinema when they see the film so that they can write down what God is saying to them.

Their admiration for penguins' way of life might be slightly misplaced. They might seem like the perfect family, with dad

actively involved in childcare, mum getting the food, and the two of them side by side with a cuddly, fluffy baby between their feet. We assume them to be devoted couples because we've heard the myth that they stay together for life. In fact, penguins are serially monogamous, faithful to one partner while they breed, but most move on to a new mate the next year.

But the delight that the film provokes in so many people comes as no surprise to one group: psychologists. In experiments a sure way of improving a person's mood is to show them a short film of penguins slip-sliding on the ice.

We all relate to penguins. They are universally loved. Penguins are successful hunters, efficient and sleek in the water, and perfectly adapted to survive freezing temperatures. But these aren't the qualities that we love in them. We like their incompetence. We like the fact that although they are birds they can't fly. They can't even walk very well, but their toddler-like clumsiness makes them all the more attractive. The pleasure we take in their unsteadiness is illustrated by the popular, but sadly apocryphal, story of flocks of penguins in the Falkland Islands falling over flat on their backs as they craned their necks to watch RAF jets flying overhead.

Penguins stand upright like we do; so much of their behaviour — including their amusing flaws — seems human. The makers of *March of the Penguins* have capitalised on this, giving us shots of the male and female appearing to kiss, for example. "In the harshest place on earth, love finds a way," says Freeman, meaningfully. The fluffy baby learns to walk by shuffling along on its father's feet — something a lot of little girls and boys will be able to relate to.

We love to spot the way their behaviour mirrors ours. A friend remembers going to Stanley Park Zoo in Vancouver where there was a penguin pool that had a series of diving boards. Penguins would climb all the way to the top of the highest board, shuffle to the end, look down and then think better of it. Like an over-ambitious child, the penguins went through the same ritual with each of the lower boards, before simply belly-flopping in off the side.

We can also identify with their life as a community, complete with a crèche, bickering neighbours and a love of being together. In blizzards they huddle together for warmth, with those on the outside leaning forward in such a way that the huddle constantly spirals round, giving each penguin a chance to be in the middle where it's warmest.

Why should our love of penguins be useful to scientists? Many experiments have used penguin videos to manipulate human mood. Barbara Frederickson, a psychologist from the University of Michigan, split people into five groups and made each group watch a different video: a serene film of fields and streams, a scene of bullying from the film *Witness*, a video of a climbing accident, a screensaver where coloured sticks build up in a pile, and a film of penguins. Just two minutes spent watching penguins waddling, swimming and jumping had a noticeable effect on that group's moods.

After the experiment, all the groups were asked which emotion they felt most strongly while watching the film, to picture themselves in a situation where they might experience that emotion, and to imagine what they would like to do at that very moment.

This is a way of assessing the effect of mood on creativity; the more suggestions you have, the more creative you are. The people who saw the penguin film came up with the most suggestions. Watching penguins, it seems, makes us more creative, and psychologists believe it's because penguins make us feel happy. Happiness makes us more creative because it causes us to think more broadly.

Human beings have evolved to feel every emotion for a reason. It is easy to see why the negative emotions are useful; without fear we wouldn't run and hide, without disgust we would eat putrid food. It's harder to see the purpose of positive emotions. But joy is useful because the search for it makes us more curious — and more creative once we have found it. The more creative we are, the more ingenious we are at surviving.

So perhaps we should all have a daily dose of penguin videos to inspire us. But choose your moment carefully: joy is useful for creative tasks, but it makes you less attentive to detail. So

don't watch penguin videos just before you sit down to do your tax return. Although penguins can be usefully used for commercial purposes (think of Penguin biscuits), those with a political purpose might want to think twice. It's not only the political right which has recruited penguins to its cause. For six years a male penguin couple at Central Park Zoo in New York have been the darlings of gay activism. Silo and Roy, as the penguins are known, even star in a children's book. Sadly, today Roy spends much of his time standing quietly facing the wall because his partner has abandoned him for Scrappy, who, disappointingly for some, is female. It's not clear whether the use of penguins to make political points is entirely effective since, on hearing these stories, most people tend to laugh.

Instead of proving political truths the stories demonstrate something simpler — penguins just make us feel happy.

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