Hunger, Fatigue And Resilience: A Letter From An Emperor Penguin

My home is Antarctica. Even though I am a bird, I cannot fly. I am the largest, deepest-diving penguin. The only one which does not build any sort of nests at all. Moreover, I belong to the only penguin species that breed during the Antarctic's winter season. I am the Emperor Penguin. And here, let me introduce you to my fascinating, yet challenging life.

It is winter and all other penguin species has left to warmer areas. But not us. Me and other Emperor Penguins are hanging around and do one of the major things that my species do. Which is… hanging around. But hold on, there is much more in my life going on. In fact, I have busy life.

A few weeks ago, I have left to get food for my chick, as I have many times before. Each time I return to my nesting area, I face the same problem- I must find my own offspring in a crowd of thousand almost identical chicks. Every few steps, I call out for my baby with a unique identifying call. This is the way we find each other. If I would leave him for too long, he might die of hunger and this is my worst nightmare. Luckily, I find my baby and his mother. We squeak and screech each other. These are the moments of pure happiness. It has been weeks since we have seen each other, because me and my partner must constantly travel back and forth across the ice to the sea, to satisfy our baby's appetite.

You might wonder, how did I get to the point of my life where I became a father?

Well, it all has been a long journey, full of ups and downs. As everything else in my life, mating is not easy either. In order to mate, me and other males and females march to our breeding ground, which sometimes might be even 80 miles away. Sometimes we encounter unformed ice, which is an impassable obstacle for us, thus we are stuck. I am one of the leading penguins, hence I try to adapt to the new situation. I walk away and look for an alternative way around.

Once we get to our breeding ground, I must find a partner. When I find one that likes me back, we breed and are bonded until the end of the parenting season. Next, I wait a month for my empress to lay an egg. This is a turning point in my life as it is my duty to take care of the unhatched chick. The temperature now reaches around -40°C, hence in order to survive we must create a cluster for warmth.

It's been two months since my chick was laid and it is now about to hatch, thus I do my best to protect it from the freezing winds by covering it with my body. It is extremely cold, and I am starving. Yet, we walk continuously, as persistence is our only hope. Knowing that for some males this journey turns into an upsetting experience in which they lose their eggs, I try hard not to drop mine. After two months we get back. Fortunately, I complete this expedition successfully and become a father. Nevertheless, there is still many challenges I must face.

I have not eaten for months. In order to feed myself and the baby I go back and forth from my nesting area to the sea. I feel like I know the road perfectly. Surprisingly, I face new obstacles at

almost every corner as the path from my nest to the sea changes and cracks rapidly, influenced by climate change. The size and shape of the ice sheets is shifting in catastrophic ways. Gigantic icepack, thousands of square miles in size break off, changing surrounding landscape within seconds. Familiar landmarks disappear from my sight, but more importantly shrinking iceberg endangers my food supply and threatens life. Believe me, it is chaotic here. What once was frozen rock-solid home for me and others in Antarctica, now is a fragile place making our future unpredictable.

Living in such unsafe habitat is frustrating. However, what gives me sleepless nights is the future of all the penguins, which is strongly endangered by the climate crisis. We try to adjust to the rapidly transforming conditions of the environment, but I am afraid our ability to be resilient is not as fast as the changes we will face in the future.

As you already know, successful breeding for us, emperor penguins, is nothing else but a though mission. Egg hatching success levels decrease when the sea-ice extent rise; chick deaths also increase. Therefore, even though we might seem to be resilient to the harsh environment we live in, I consider us to be highly sensitive to climatic changes. Hence, climate change not only has negative impact on the land we live on and is the reason for starvation, but it also drastically threatens existence of the whole Emperor species.

As your read my story, I want you to remember that Antarctica is a unique place. It can be magnificent, but it can also be cruel. Despite my abilities to adapt to the new circumstances, my survival remains uncertain. If the ice continues to melt at its current speed, me, my family and the rest of my species could face extinction before the end of the century. Thus, I need your help. I need your help in taking care of my future. And I need your help in protecting our planet. I believe that with your power and willingness to act now our world and the existence of my species can still be saved.

I do not ask for much. I just want a bright future. A future in which my species is still extent, we have balanced ecosystem and plethora of food for our loved ones. I am certain, if you were a penguin, you would want the same thing for your family, wouldn’t you?