THE PROGRESS REPORT

Save the Penguins

By Fred E. Foldvary

There are 17 species of penguins in the world, and 11 are in danger of becoming extinct. For example, there are only a few thousand Galapagos penguins left because El Niño depleted the fish they eat. There are also only a few thousand left of the yellow-eyed and fiordland penguins which live south of Australia. Penguins are dying off because of pollution, overfishing, coastal development, and climate changes.

Penguins are native to the southern hemisphere. They live in Antarctica and off the coasts of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and South America, with some as far north as the Galapagos Islands, which are part of Ecuador.

A report by Usha Lee McFarling of the Knight Rider Newspapers, December 6, 1998, states that 40,000 penguins are killed each year by oil spills off the coast of Argentina. Pollution in the ocean also reduces the ability of penguins to reproduce. In New Zealand and Australia, non-indigenous predators such as cats, dogs, and ferrets feed on the vulnerable penguins.

The penguins have limited territory and rely on fishing near their nests. They depend on specific fish such as anchovies and sardines. Human fishing competes with the Penguins and can eliminate their food supply. Flying birds can hunt in a wider territory, and some such as sea gulls can adapt to other types of food, but penguins must eat the local fish. In some places, the human fishing industry also directly kills the penguins. They get snared in nets, and are even deliberately killed and their meat used as bait.

In Peru, the guano (droppings from penguins) is harvested as a resource. This can harm the penguins, since they burrow into guano piles to hide from seals.

Live penguins can be an economic resource, since they attract tourists. But if not properly managed, tourism can threaten the survival of the penguins. Tourists step on the eggs and interrupt breeding. Tour boats also pose the danger of oil spills.

These combined forces that threaten the penguins are patterns that impact on the environment in general. Because penguins are popular with us humans, their cause could be a catalyst for greater global efforts to save the natural environment. We need an international treaty on wildlife to make those who destroy wildlife pay for the damage they cause. Tour boats and ships, for example, should not be allowed to operate unless they have insurance or other funds to pay for any oil spills.

The greater problem of global pollution requires an international agreement to make all polluters pay for their damage. This cost would have two effects. The pollution charges would be passed on to the consumers of the products, making those items more expensive and thus reducing the quantity purchased, and thereby reducing the pollution. The charges would also induce polluting

firms to reduce the charge by putting in equipment and changing their production methods to reduce the pollution. The charges could be used to pay for monitoring the wildlife to enforce the payments.

Fishing is a problem because the oceans are unmanaged common property. The remedy is to limit the fishing to a sustainable level and then auction off the rights to fish. The payment for fishing permits would be a type of rent for the use of the fishing water. Killing penguins and other endangered wildlife should be penalized as well, and non-native predators need to be controlled.

Because penguins capture the public imagination, environmental groups can use their plight to educate the public on the general problem of the destruction of wildlife. But environmental groups should also educate themselves on the economics of conservation. Often the best environmental policy is not command and control, but to affect human action through the market, by making consumers and producers pay the full social cost of their damage. That cost may be difficult to measure and estimate, but such things are better done badly than not at all.

Let us hope the tragedy of losing most of the world's penguin species will help spur greater efforts to preserve the natural environment. You can help by supporting environmental organizations and joining the dialogue on environmental economics.