

Demographic models and IPCC climate projections predict the decline of an emperor penguin population

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Studies have reported important effects of recent climate change on Antarctic species, but there has been to our knowledge no attempt to explicitly link those results to forecasted population responses to climate change. Antarctic sea ice extent (SIE) is projected to shrink as concentrations of atmospheric greenhouse gases (GHGs) increase, and emperor penguins (*Aptenodytes forsteri*) are extremely sensitive to these changes because they use sea ice as a breeding, foraging and molting habitat. We project emperor penguin population responses to future sea ice changes, using a stochastic population model that combines a unique long-term demographic dataset (1962–2005) from a colony in Terre Adélie, Antarctica and projections of SIE from General Circulation Models (GCM) of Earth's climate included in the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment report. We show that the increased frequency of warm events associated with projected decreases in SIE will reduce the population viability. The probability of quasi-extinction (a decline of 95% or more) is at least 36% by 2100. The median population size is projected to decline from $\approx 6,000$ to ≈ 400 breeding pairs over this period. To avoid extinction, emperor penguins will have to adapt, migrate or change the timing of their growth stages. However, given the future projected increases in GHGs and its effect on Antarctic climate, evolution or migration seem unlikely for such long lived species at the remote southern end of the Earth.

bird populations | climate change | quasi-extinction | sea ice | stochastic matrix population models

A major challenge in ecology and conservation is to project the ecological responses of future climate changes (1, 2), using the reported effects of recent climate change on ecological processes. Recently, Thomas *et al.* (3) predicted that future climate change may cause the extinction of between 15% and 37% of species by 2050, based on species-specific climate envelopes. However, they project 0% species extinction risk for the ice biome, although there is clear evidence of dramatic changes in polar ecosystems related to anthropogenic warming, which may lead to extinctions [e.g., penguins in the Antarctic Peninsula (4), polar bears in the Arctic (5)].

To project a population's response to future climate change one must (i) quantify the effects of climate on vital rates, (ii) project future climate conditions (as we do here with GCM climate models), and (iii) integrate these effects into population models. Most of the literature on population-climate studies has focused on one part of the life cycle [e.g., changing timing of life history in relation to climate conditions (6, 7)], because of the difficulty of measuring climate influences on life history traits over the entire life cycle (8). Few studies have addressed the population response to observed climate change (but see refs. 9–11); even fewer have predicted the population response to future changes (but see ref. 5).

Based on knowledge of the effects of sea ice on the vital rates and population of emperor penguins (12, 13), we develop a stochastic population model to estimate population growth rates

and probabilities of quasi-extinction under projections of future ice conditions from climate models used in the latest IPCC Fourth Assessment Report (14).

Emperor penguins reproduce during the harsh Antarctic winter in dense colonies distributed around Antarctica. Sea ice is a key breeding and feeding habitat for emperor penguins. Colonies are formed on sea ice many kilometers from the open sea, and breeding emperors make foraging trips between the colony and areas of open water during the entire incubation and chick rearing periods (15). In years with dense and extensive sea ice cover, foraging trips are longer, energetic costs for adults are higher, and offspring provisioning is lower (16), resulting in lower hatching success (12). Alternatively, absence of, or early break-up of, the winter sea ice holding up the colony may cause low breeding success (17). Sea ice extent during winter also affects the abundance of prey for emperor penguins. Winters with extensive sea ice enhance krill abundance (18), and emperor penguins mainly feed on fish species that depend on krill and other crustaceans (19, 20). In accordance with this, years with reduced sea ice extent coincide with reduced adult survival rates (12). The effects of sea ice on vital rates of the emperor penguin are thus complex (4, 21) and affect the dynamics of its populations.

A dramatic example of such effects, which provides a key element in our analysis, occurred in Terre Adélie between 1972 and 1981. A sudden decrease in winter sea ice extent during several consecutive years, by $\approx 11\%$ on average, coincided with an abrupt decline of the population, by $\approx 50\%$ (13), and these abrupt changes were attributed to a regime shift (22) (see Fig. S1). Analyses of ice core data (23) suggest a change in meridional atmospheric circulation during the 1970s, bringing more moisture from warm subtropical sources to the Antarctic coast, possibly causing the highest winter air temperature and the lowest winter SIE observed in Terre Adélie during the regime shift (22).

Results and Discussion

We developed a stochastic version of a stage-classified population model (13) (see *Materials and Methods*) to determine the effects of a fluctuating sea ice environment on the stochastic population growth rate. Following previous studies (see review in ref. 24) we classified the environment into 2 distinct states: outside (1962–1971; 1982–2006) and inside (1972–1981) the regime shift period (see *Materials and Methods*). We will refer to

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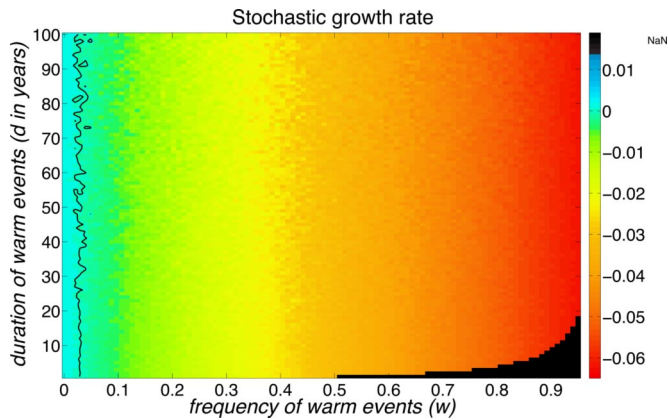


Fig. 1. Stochastic growth rate ($\log \lambda_s$) as a function of the frequency w and mean duration d of warm events (in years). It was calculated from a stochastic model with 2 states: normal and warm environmental conditions. The contour denotes $\log \lambda_s = 0$. The frequency of warm events must satisfy $d > \frac{w}{(w-1)}$. The dark area indicates impossible combinations of w and d .

these as “normal” and “warm” conditions, respectively. The environment follows a 2-state Markov chain that determines the frequency and duration of warm conditions (see *Materials and Methods*).

Fig. 1 shows the resulting stochastic growth rate as a function of the frequency and duration of warm events. It decreases dramatically as the frequency increases. The duration (reflecting the autocorrelation of the environment) has little effect, as expected for such long-lived species. A frequency greater than $w \approx 0.03$ produces a negative long term growth rate. Thus, if climate change increases the frequency of warm events, it will reduce the population viability of the emperor penguin.

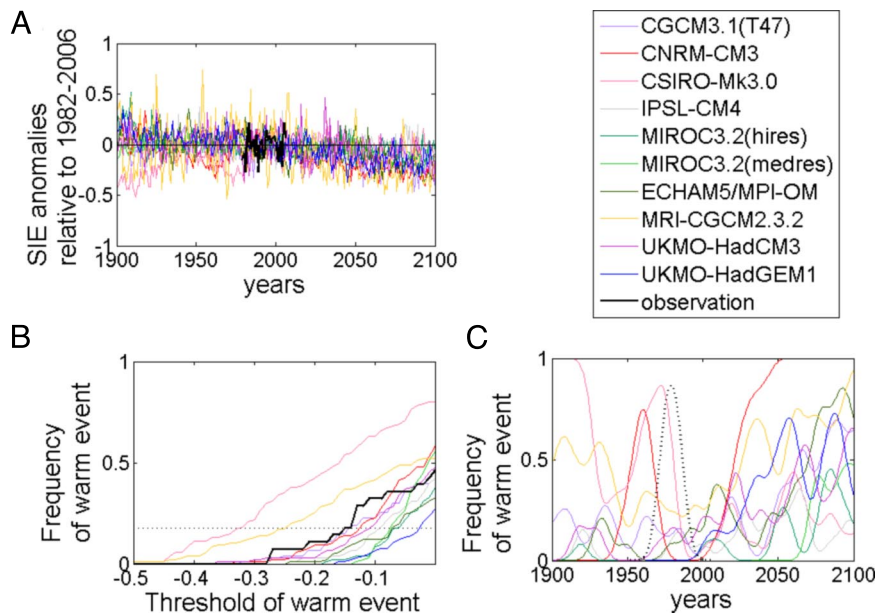


Fig. 2. Sea ice anomalies and warm events. (A) Proportional change in winter sea ice extent anomalies (SIEa) in Terre Adélie (sector 120°E–160°E), measured relative to the mean over the period 1982–2006, produced by 10 coupled IPCC climate models from 1900 to 2100 (for line colors, see legend). (B) Frequency of warm events calculated from the backward projections of SIEa for 10 IPCC climate models from 1900 to 2006 (color lines) and calculated from SIEa satellite observations from 1979 to 2006 (black line) as a function of the threshold defining a warm event. The frequency of warm events experienced by emperor penguin between 1952 and 2006 is 0.18, and is represented by the dotted line. (C) Frequency of warm events from 1900 to 2100 calculated from the SIEa produced by 10 IPCC climate models with the most conservative warm event threshold of -0.15 . The dotted black line represent w_t calculated from the sequence of warm and normal events define by the observed regime shift from 1952 to 2006.

Although climate models differ on the sign of Antarctic sea ice trends at the end of the 20th century (25) (see *SI Text* and *Table S1*), suggesting a strong influence of natural variability, nearly all models project that sea ice will shrink in future global warming scenarios (26). To project the consequences of this decline, we used a 3-step approach (as in ref. 5), which we will describe first in outline and later in more detail. First, we obtained forecasts of sea ice from a set of IPCC climate models from the CMIP3 archive (see *Materials and Methods* and *SI Text*). Second, we classified each year as warm or normal, by comparing the proportional decline in ice in that year to a specified SIE threshold value. The result is a binary sequence of warm and normal years, produced by each climate model, for the rest of the century. These sequences were translated into forecasts of the frequency of warm events, using nonparametric smoothing (5, 27). Finally, the frequencies were used to produce stochastic population projections. Therefore, the analysis depends on the set of climate models, on the sea ice forecasts, and on the SIE threshold defining a warm event.

The sea ice forecasts were extracted from the output of a set of 16 IPCC models over the emperor penguin foraging sector (16) in Terre Adélie, i.e., sector 120°E–160°E (see *SI Text* and *Fig. S2*). The climate models were forced with the “business as usual” forcing scenario A1B, which describes a future world of very rapid economic growth that depends on fossil and nonfossil energy sources in balanced proportions. Under this scenario, CO₂ levels double from the preindustrial level of 360 parts per million (ppm) to 720 ppm by 2100. We selected 10 of these models, in which the statistical properties of SIE match with those of the satellite observations (28, 25) (see *Fig. S3*), for analysis. We transformed the SIE from each model to proportional anomalies (SIEa), measured relative to the mean from 1982–2006, as shown in Fig. 2A for each of the 10 models.

We defined a warm event to occur whenever SIEa drops below a specified SIE threshold. Fig. 2B shows the frequency of warm events, as a function of the SIE threshold, for model projections

