January 28, 2013

Penguin Colony’s First Contact With Humans In Antarctica Captured On Camera (VIDEO)

The Huffington Post | By Dominique Mosbergen Posted: 01/26/2013 4:57 pm EST | Updated: 01/27/2013 12:39 am EST

A group of explorers recently became the first humans to ever make contact with a previously unknown colony of more than 9,000 Emperor penguins in the Antarctic. It was a meeting that the expedition leader called "unforgettable."

According to the International Polar Foundation, the group made contact with the Emperor penguin colony, said to be one of Antarctica's largest, in early December after evidence of the birds' existence was discovered using satellite imagery. In a 2009 paper, researchers from the British Antarctic Survey said they located the colony after images taken from space revealed evidence of "penguin poo."

Still, until the recent expedition, there hadn't been unequivocal proof of the colony's existence.

Expedition leader Alain Hubert, who has been in Antarctica for seven seasons and is in the region with the International Polar Foundation research team, told National Geographic that the satellite images gave him and his crew a "rough idea of where to start looking."

Last month, Hubert, along with two other men, hopped on snowmobiles and took a treacherous journey to where they believed the penguins to be. To their amazement, they struck gold. "We were lucky to find it," Hubert told National Geographic.

On Dec. 3, Hubert and his team stumbled upon the 9,000 Emperor penguins, basking in the Antarctic summer sun. They say they were the first humans that the penguins had ever seen.

According to CNN, about 3/4 of the colony were chicks. "Despite global warming, this colony... is growing," said Hubert.

Though Emperor penguins, a species endemic to Antarctica, once lived abundantly in the wild and were considered animals of "least concern" from a conservation standpoint, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) recently changed the status of the species to "near threatened." The animals are "projected to undergo a moderately rapid population decline over the next three generations owing to the effects of projected climate change," the IUCN explains.

As the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition website notes, Emperor penguins are "highly vulnerable" to changes in climate and are "predicted to suffer" if the world's average temperature should increase by 2 degrees Celsius (about 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), a change experts say will come by the year 2052.

According to a 2011 report by the National Research Council, the average temperature of the Earth’s surface has increased by about 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit over the past century; however, a whopping 1 degree Fahrenheit of this warming is said to have occurred over the past three decades.