



## Reader's Guide: Topics and Discussion Questions



You're welcome to use some, or all, of these questions: on your own, with a book club, or in conversation with friends and family. You'll find more resources and free downloads on *Every Penguin's* [book page](#).

### Introduction

1. **Anthropomorphism:** What is it and why do biologists typically avoid it? What role can anthropomorphism legitimately play in our understanding of human / animal relationships? Bergman calls penguins the most “anthropomorphic bird in the world.” How does that help him or us understand our affection for penguins? How do you feel about this point of view?
2. **Maps and islands:** The encounter with the king penguin occurs on St. Andrews Bay, South Georgia Island. Can you find it on a map? Can you find: Gough Island? Macquarie Island? The Falkland Islands? Which of these islands might you love to visit? Why?
3. **Misconceptions about penguins:** It seems everyone loves penguins, but people often don't know much about them. What are one or two major misconceptions about penguins? What's something new you're learning about penguins?
4. **Talk to animals:** There are various ways humans communicate with animals.
  - a. There's the literal question of animals using human language, such as parrots and chimpanzees and dolphins.
  - b. This chapter raises questions of the ways that animals—penguins here—do communicate, though not in human language.
  - c. There's the broader question of “intuiting” communication. Linda Hogan puts it this way: “There is a way that nature speaks, that land speaks. Most of the time we are simply not patient enough, quiet enough, to pay attention.”
  - d. Have you had the experience of hearing nature speak, an animal call to you? Tell the story.
5. **Nature and the deeper self:** In the encounter with the king penguin, Bergman writes that the call of the penguin was an announcement of identity, literally. It was also a call to the author to announce himself. Do you feel nature calls us to a deeper sense of self? How so? Do you have a personal story of feeling a deeper sense of identity through nature or an animal?

## **Part I: Adventure**

1. **Adventure defined:** The author offers several definitions of adventure. Which is your favorite and why? How would you define adventure? Do you think that adventure becomes more prized as our daily lives become increasingly scheduled and regimented? Why or why not?
2. **Comfort zone and contact zone:** The author says that adventure takes place in the space between the comfort zone and the contact zone. What does this mean to you? What is the contact zone? In what sense is this the space where change can happen?
3. **Your adventure story:** Do you have an adventure story, where you left your comfort zone? Would you share the story?
4. **Contact zone and world of the other:** Have you ever felt you entered the world of the “other,” whether animal other or human “other.” Tell the story. Did it change your view of this “other”? How so? Did it change you? How so?
5. **Crested penguins:** The Fiordland crested penguin is one species of “crested penguins.” What are other species of crested penguins? [Consult the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) [www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org) or Birdlife International [www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org) for answers.] Which is your favorite, and why? One of the most beloved species is the macaroni penguin: see if you can look it up and learn why it was named “macaroni.”
6. **Marked by penguins:** What does it mean to be marked by penguins? Have you ever felt marked with a strong sense of tribe?

## **Part II: Science and Extreme Conservation**

1. **Number of species of penguins:** Penguin researcher Tom Hart warns the author that 18 may be a mistaken total number of penguin species. What is his number? How many species do you think there are? Look up Little Penguins, for example: might there be more than one species of this penguin? Why is the total number so indeterminant? The image or narrative of a storm and its instability frames this issue: how does this narrative comment on the whole question of our knowledge of penguins and the fundamental concept of a “species?”
2. **Volunteering:** In the back of the book, you’ll find a list of resources and organizations like Earth Watch for volunteering. Do you see an opportunity you’d enjoy volunteering for? Which one and what is attractive about it to you? Perhaps you already volunteer. What do you do and how do you feel about your contributions?
3. **Penguins in Southern Hemisphere:** Penguins are creatures of the Southern Hemisphere. They are found on some of the most remote islands in the world and some of the most far-away places. Nevertheless, our lives are interconnected and entangled with theirs in many ways. How does the way we live affect the way penguins can live? What do you think about these connections?

4. **Statistics on African penguins:** According to Richard Sherley, the numbers for the African penguin over the last century have plummeted. The species could disappear entirely in the coming years. Is there a species that you have seen that may go from abundant to extinct—or deeply endangered – during your lifetime? Sherley says that extinction is likely for African penguins, “unless something changes.” What do you think must change to avoid mass extinctions?
5. **Penguins as a whole:** The author notes the paradox that the most beloved family of birds is also among the most endangered. Look up a penguin species on the [website](#) for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). For example, emperor penguins. How is this species doing? Is there something toxic in our love for wild animals?
6. **Nations and persons:** Nelson Mandela and his incarceration on Robben Island is a sad story that leads to hope. Where do you find hope to sustain yourself during dark and difficult times?

### **Part III: Pilgrimage**

1. **Spiritual journey:** How is the quest for the penguin colony framed as a mystic quest? The author writes that animals are an ancient image in narratives of the quest. What are some examples, ancient and modern, and why do animals function this way in our stories?
2. **Pilgrimage:** What are some of the definitions of pilgrimage offered in this section? Have you felt the call of a spiritual quest, or pilgrimage?
3. **We want to know the world:** There is a difference between something being unknown and something being a mystery. How would you define the difference? Henry David Thoreau writes, for example: “At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable. . .” Do you think that wonder and mystery are necessities for human beings? Why or why not?
4. **Quests and questions:** A quest is not about answers, but about the questions we use to frame our lives. What do you think this means, and do you agree?
5. **“Awakened wonder”:** Considerable research suggests now that wonder can lead to or be the trigger of an ethical awakening. Do you agree? How so?
6. **Nature and spirit:** The author discovers that attending to nature closely can lead a person more deeply into one’s spirit and soul. It’s a paradox of mystic contemplation that the way outward and the way inward are the same. Mary Oliver makes the same point in her beautiful poem, “5 a.m. in the Pine Woods”: “So this is how you swim inward, so this is how you flow outward.” John Muir agrees: “I went out for a walk . . . and stayed out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.” What does this mean? Have you had a spiritual experience in nature?

## Conclusion

1. **Caring for the planet:** Bergman argues that penguins are uniquely capable of teaching us about a deepening care for the planet, a deepening love for creatures. Do you agree and if so, how?
2. **Penguins and resilience:** While on this penguin quest, the author receives a serious diagnosis from his doctor. What is it, and how do penguins help him deal with this news?
3. **Penguins and their allure:** The book describes penguins as “diminutive versions of ourselves,” and in our anthropomorphism we find the key to our love of them. They are like children to us and evoke a “parental affection” in us. Do you agree? What feelings do penguins evoke in you?
4. **“Penguin Glow”:** The author’s wife, Susan Mann, coins this phrase for the effect of being in the presence of penguins. What does she mean by it? Being among penguins in the wild is unlike the experience of any other creature—a unique combination of affection, comedy, and awe. Is there a species of animal that evokes unique feelings for you? What animal and what feelings?
5. **Penguins and hope:** If we cannot save what we love, the book asks, what can we save? Do you feel hope through penguins? Where do you find your hope?

## Overall Questions

1. **Role of photographs:** Bergman believes that photography is its own way of knowing animals. That photography helps us enter their world and see the world from their perspective. Do you agree? Choose a couple of photos in the book you particularly enjoy and explain why you like them.
2. **The power of story:** Everyone loves a good story. In what way is it that stories are also a way of knowing? What do stories help us understand that may not, for example, be comprehensible by science?
3. **Conservation and animals:** With 27% of all species “red listed” by the IUCN, we are living in a period of mass extinctions. The climate crisis, wildlife trafficking, and many other global and local problems caused by humans are hurting and threatening animals. Additionally, the corona virus pandemic originated in a wet animal market in China.
  - a. What news are you aware of that may signal the need for humans to seriously reassess their relationships with animals?
  - b. Metaphorically, is the king penguin on South Georgia Island calling us to change our views of animals, and what would you say to it in response? Are humans being called to develop a new relationship with animals, a new ethic for creatures?
  - c. If yes, what will you do to answer the call? One idea: see this [Make a Difference](#) card. What are you already doing, and what new action(s) might you want to do?