

From the bottom of the world

Some thoughts on returning from an Antarctic expedition

By Michael Norton, author of 365 WAYS TO CHANGE THE WORLD and THE EVERYDAY ACTIVIST, 10th December 2007

The Antarctic continent is a truly great wilderness area, possibly the most important and the most spectacular in the whole world. But there are problems.

- There are **geo-political problems**. Countries are jockeying for position and attempting to gain influence on deciding Antarctica's future. The Antarctic Treaty which governs what can and can't be done will come up for renewal; and a lot of countries are looking greedily at the potential for mining minerals and searching for oil (which are both currently prohibited)
- **Tourism** is having a growing impact, despite the voluntary self-regulation through the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators, which specifies that nothing can be taken in and nothing taken out – you are not even allowed to have a pee or remove a single sea shell. There is still pristine snow and ice in the areas that tourists visit. But you can now occasionally see beer cans, toilet paper and used condoms washed up on to the shore. Many of the research stations now treat and remove their sewage (after pressure from Greenpeace). But the US South Pole base buries its sewage underground – so that the South Pole itself now rests on a sea of frozen American shit. Tourism is growing. This year over 30,000 people will visit and over 20,000 will land. And tour operators are starting to offer packages which involve staying overnight on land. Both these are bound to create further problems.
- There is still a vast array of **wildlife**. But whales have been hunted to near extinction, with only 3-4% of original stocks now remaining, Krill is beginning to be caught, currently only in quite small quantities; but this could become the next marine species to be overexploited, which would seriously affect the wide variety of creatures (including penguins) that depend on krill for their food.
- You can see **climate change in action**, not that you can actually tell from being there that the continent is getting warmer. But you can see the vastness of the polar icecap and understand the impact that its melting would cause on sea levels. And the tourists who go there are flying thousands of miles to get to the Antarctic, and the ships require several tonnes of fuel each day to power themselves.

All these problems need solutions. It is up to each and every one of us who have enjoyed and been inspired by the Antarctic to be part of the solution – whether we have visited the continent or just dreamed about doing so. But there are two barriers which have to be overcome first:

- You may believe that anything that we can do will be insignificant in relation to the scale of the problem. But doing something is better than doing nothing. Change has to start somewhere. And your small actions can inspire others and can encourage politicians and business to treat the matter much more seriously.
- You have to overcome your apathy. In fact it is apathy which is the world's biggest problem, not global warming, poverty, AIDS, conflict, corruption or abuse of human rights. If you recognise that something needs doing, change will only happen if someone actually gets up off their backside and does something.

Getting involved is a three-stage process:

1. You start by doing little things in your everyday life that make a difference.
2. First get interested in an issue and then do something more substantial about it. Do this with friends, Get a sense of achievement. Let one thing lead to another, go on to do bigger and better things. Try to have fun doing something for a better world.
3. Finally, use your brain to come up with a creative solution which makes a significant impact on the problem.

So here are some little things to get started:

1. ***Become an ambassador for Antarctica.*** Find out as much as you can about it. Tell people about this wonderful wilderness of a continent and its importance to the future of the planet. Encourage people to speak up for its preservation. Put pressure on your politicians so that they promote and support policies which are “Antarctica-friendly”.

2. ***Eat sustainable fish.*** Much of the world’s fish has become over-fished and is facing extinction. The fish you can eat with a clear consciousness come from sustainable catcheries. The Marine Stewardship Council and Greenpeace with its Oceans campaign both have information on sustainable fishing: www.msc.org and www.greenpeace.org.uk. For a list of fish that you can’t eat, go to: www.greenpeace.org.uk/oceans/what-we-are-doing/sustainable-seafood/seafood-what-not-to-buy. Greenpeace is particularly concerned about the devastating impact of factory fishing on the ocean. It has just launched a new seafood research project to collect data on what fish is available at food stores. You can just sign up to be part of this campaign. Once registered, you will get instructions and a survey form to fill out when you visit your local supermarket or food store. This research shouldn’t take more than 30 minutes to complete. You then report the results back to Greenpeace, who assemble the survey data. <http://usactions.greenpeace.org>

3. ***Give up plastic bags.*** It is just a small step in reducing the energy you use or cause to be used, but it will also save animals and fish, who often ingest used plastic bags which makes life difficult for them. When you go to the supermarket make sure you take a reusable bag. It may not do much in itself for reducing carbon consumption, but it is a first step. Then, contact people who are promoting similar or contrary messages in the media, and try to get them to see the perspective from your point of view.

4. ***Do something for World Ocean Day,*** which is June 8th. Check out their website, and see how you can help – perhaps by doing a beach clean up for them. World Ocean Day: www.theoceanproject.org. The International Coastal Cleanup takes place in September each year. On a single day, 300,000 volunteers in 90 countries – from Argentina to Vietnam – help clean up over 11,000 miles of shoreline. Cleanup Day is also about pollution prevention. Volunteers record the different types of marine debris, and analyzing this leads to a better understanding of the causes. Join in. www.coastalcleanup.org

5. ***Do something simple to address global warming.*** Take a first step to becoming more conscious about the issues and as a starting point doing something that will have real impact. Here are two things you might like to do:

- ***Search on Blackle:*** www.blackle.com. This saves energy by having white writing on a black screen, and it uses the Google search engine. They tell you how many kilowatts of energy have been saved as a result of people using this, It is a small step, but seeing the black screen will remind you continuously of the importance of the issue of global warming.

• *Do the Green Thing*. Subscribe to the website and do the simple action each month. You will find their website a lot of fun. www.dothegreenthing.com

6. **Click and donate**. The money comes from the site's sponsors who pay for each click by a visitor to the site. Check out the different options, which include The Rainforest Site to preserve rainforest in central and south America and The Hunger Site to feed the hungry. There is an up-to-date listing of click and donate sites with an analysis of the response is on the "Charity" section at <http://distributedcomputing.info/projects.html>. Or if this doesn't appeal to you, go to www.freerice.com when you will be asked to judge which out of four possible meanings is the meaning of a particular word. Each time you guess right, next question is harder. Each time you guess wrong, the next question is easier. For every question you answer correctly, twenty grains of rice are donated to help feed the world's hungry. On its first day (October 7th 2007), this site raised 830 grains of rice, By the end of December 2007, the daily total was around 350 million grains of rice.

7. **Save your spare change** each night. Before you go to bed, tip your change into a jar, When it is full then turn it into proper cash and find something to donate it to a non-profit, possibly some Antarctic conservation trust. Check out the opportunities. Also look at the idea of helping a poor person out of poverty at www.kiva.org

8. **Give up bottled water**. Ask for tap with ice and a slice of lemon, instead. Bottled water is an environmentally insane project causing pollution and congestion to get the water to you and creating an environmental hazard through the empty bottles people end disposing of. Indeed if we spent the money we as a world are spending on bottled water, we could solve many of the world's problems, including the preservation of Antarctica, with the money saved.

9. **Plant one tree**. This will breathe out more than amount of oxygen that you will need to live. It also absorbs carbon dioxide which will do a little to address global warming. Check out the UN's Billion Trees Campaign: www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign. Plant your own in your yard or garden, or just somewhere where you think a tree is needed (this is called "guerrilla gardening").

10. **Have a Whale of a Time**. Enjoy changing the world. Have fun. Make new friends. If you want to find out more about whales, go to: www.whaleofatime.org

Each of us can do something. Pledge to do as many of these ten things as you can. Get started; it's never too early. And remember the old Quaker proverb: *It's better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness.*

Check out the Antarctic Heritage Trust, which seeks to preserve some of the historic settlements on the continent used by explorers and whalers: www.ukaht.org and www.heritage-antarctica.org

2007-08 is International Polar Year organised by the International Council for Science and the World Meteorological Organisation: www.ipy.org

For more information on how to change the world, read Michael Norton's two books:

365 Ways to Change the World, published in Australia, Canada, India, South Africa, the

UK and the USA, and The Everyday Activist, published in the UK.

Or visit his blog at: www.365ways.blogspot.com

Or sign up to the newsletter at: www.365act.com

Michael Norton travelled to Antarctica on the Orlova, from 1st to 11th December 2007