



FISH, GUNS, AND FAMINE

WHEN THE ACADEMY AWARD for Best Documentary is presented tonight, one nominee will have more fans than all its competitors combined: "March of the Penguins," the charming nature film that has already become the fourth-highest-grossing documentary of all time, behind only "Woodstock," "Fahrenheit 9/11," and "That's Entertainment."

This success is not accidental. Directed by Luc Jacquet and narrated for the American audience by Morgan Freeman, "March of the Penguins" is a beautifully filmed example of the traditional nature documentary. It offers an intimate glimpse into the family lives of wild creatures, emphasizing nature's exoticism even as it tames it, showing us the characteristics other animals share with us. Penguins may seem odd—funny walk, funny habits—but their quirks are endearing, and the film's depiction of parents sharing hatching duties while the entire penguin community bands together to survive the Antarctic winter has inspired cultural conservatives to extol their anthropomorphized "family values."

But there is more than one way to make a nature film. Another of this year's Oscar-nominated documentaries, "Darwin's Nightmare," with its startling depiction of evolution, globalization, and social disintegration in Africa, represents a potent alternative vision of the genre's possibilities. Where "March of the Penguins" suggests reassuringly that the penguins' sheer resilience will keep them alive, as it always has, "Darwin's Nightmare" is a disconcerting and dystopian look at the human capacity to wreak environmental havoc, with no happy ending in sight. Less pleasant to watch than penguins, but just as carefully constructed, "Darwin's Nightmare" offers a more complex and relevant examination of the natural world today.

Directed by the Austrian Hubert Sauper, "Darwin's Nightmare" takes place around the city of Mwanza, Tanzania, on the shores of mighty Lake Victoria—site of an ecological disaster. In the 1960s, regional authorities introduced the Nile perch into its waters, apparently intended as a new source of food, although whether for locals or for export remains unclear. The perch, a six-foot-long predator, quickly decimated the native fish populations and ruined the lake's biodiversity.

Peter Dizikes is a journalist living in Arlington. He frequently writes about science and technology.

The year's best documentary about the animal world doesn't feature any penguins

BY PETER DIZIKES



Images from the Oscar-nominated documentaries "Darwin's Nightmare" (top and above), which deals with the environmental havoc wreaked on Lake Victoria and the people of Tanzania, and the more traditional nature film "March of the Penguins."



Yet this is only one aspect of the "nightmare." The others involve human society. The Nile perch, it turns out, provides plenty of food—for Europe, that is, where large Tanzanian fisheries sell it more profitably than they can in Africa. Meanwhile, as many Tanzanians go hungry, individual fishermen lack the smaller fish they once caught.

Camera in hand, Sauper ranges widely to document this new fishing economy, taking us on boats, inside fish-packing plants, on nights out with homeless children, and to lakeside settlements where itinerant workers have contracted AIDS. We see famished orphans fighting each other for food and sniffing glue from plastic fish wrappers. In one hell-on-earth tableau, laborers dry filleted fish carcasses on acres of outdoor racks, where maggots and birds feast before the leftovers are sold locally—the only pieces of perch staying in Mwanza.

Sauper, director of "Kisangani Diary," a documentary about the Rwandan genocide, also dwells on a tangential problem. Some cargo planes taking perch to Europe import arms for Africa's wars—an exchange not uncommon across the continent, whether involving fish from Tanzania or produce from other countries. As a Russian pilot admits: "The children of Angola received guns for Christmas, and the children of Europe received grapes. This is business." The adverse effects of local environmental changes, Sauper implies, are compounded by the reach of global trade.

In surveying humanity's collision with the environment, Sauper examines matters often absent from the nature film genre. He gives us nature in turmoil, full of irreversible changes, failing ecosystems, and invasive species precipitating widespread extinctions, resulting in unexpected social consequences. At a time when leading naturalists claim humans are causing a massive "sixth extinction" of species across the planet—rivaling the five greatest extinctions of the last 500 million years—these are salient issues.

In this sense, the roiling ecological crisis of Lake Victoria is a more powerful symbol of the uncertain state of the earth than the apparently pristine, timeless Antarctica of "March of the Penguins"—a film uninterested, incidentally, in the effect of climate change on the polar ice caps. Indeed, penguins face few threats to their existence. By contrast, as "Darwin's Nightmare" notes, the Nile perch, having chewed through its prey, has now turned to cannibalism.

It is a potent metaphor. "March of the Penguins" may flatter us with the suggestion that other creatures have a veneer of our civilization, but "Darwin's Nightmare" turns the formula around. Under the surface, we're still just animals.

South *Continued from page E1*

political scientists aims to end that conventional wisdom on its head. "The End of Southern Exceptionalism" (Harvard), by Richard Johnston of the University of British Columbia and Byron Shafer of Wisconsin, argues that it was economics, not race, that upended the Southern apple cart. As the South boomed and Sunbelt cities added millions of suburban residents, they argue, its burgeoning middle classes naturally tilted to the Republicans' fiscal conservatism, which promised tax cuts and smaller government programs.

"The engine of partisan change in the postwar South was, first and foremost, economic development and an associated politics of social class," they conclude after sifting through reams of electoral and polling data. "The impact of legal desegregation and an associated politics of racial identity had to be understood through its interaction with economic development." In other words, the Southern realignment wasn't about white racial backlash. Rather, it was about a new, middle-class South that focused mostly on economic issues and only secondarily on race.

It's a bold conclusion—and one that few observers of the postwar South will agree with. But if Johnston and Shafer are right, it's also an argument that could have major implications for how the Democrats view their chances in the

region—the country's fastest-growing—and how they shape their strategy nationwide.

Sooner or later," the political scientist V.O. Key wrote in "Southern Politics in State and Nation" (1949), still considered the cornerstone text on the region's politics, "the trail of inquiry leads to the Negro." And Key was not mistaken. For almost 100 years, a coterie of white elites had controlled the South by leveraging racial antagonisms and legal discrimination to ensure white solidarity behind the Democratic Party.

But what Key could not have foreseen was how soon, and how rapidly, that would all change. During the 1950s, a combination of forces—the long-term impact of New Deal infrastructure investments, the growth of regional industry, and an influx of non-Southern migrants—revolutionized the region, creating massive suburban enclaves and transforming its economy, virtually overnight, from an agricultural to a manufacturing and services base.

"Everybody forgets that the South, in the immediate postwar period is the third world. Over 40 percent of the South is in subsistence agriculture," Johnston said in an interview. "Not only is the country going to boom in the postwar years but the South is going to catch up. And the impact of that on its

The Southern realignment, Johnston and Shafer argue, wasn't about race. It was about a new middle-class South that was attracted to the GOP's fiscal conservatism.

politics causes the South to finally give up the old Southern party system and join the nation."

In 1997, spurred by a conference on American politics at Oxford University, Johnston and Shafer decided to test the conventional wisdom by analyzing the hundreds of House elections that had occurred since the end of World War II. They then compared those results against Senate and presidential elections, as well as volumes of survey results on discrimination, welfare, and race relations.

What they found was startling: White voters who lived in predominantly white areas, who held moderate political views, and who exhibited no pro-

nounced racial antagonism, were in fact more likely to vote Republican than lower-income whites in predominantly black areas who had at times bolted the Democratic Party to support segregationist demagogues like Strom Thurmond and George Wallace. It seemed clear that the shift was not about race, but class: The white middle class went right, while the white working class, for the most part, stayed left, regardless of racial views.

"What you see is a movement in the class divide first," Johnston said. "The critical point is that well-off Southerners who were not particularly one way or the other on race questions recognized correctly that the Republican Party was simply the more conservative party on economic questions."

In fact, Johnston and Shafer posit, it was not until the 1990s, when other social issues—particularly religion and the culture wars—began to become significant political factors that the region's lower-income white voters turned to the GOP as well.

But while Johnston and Shafer rally some impressive numbers, not everyone is convinced. Younger, better-educated whites may have found the GOP's economic conservatism attractive, but many Southern historians argue that the initial shift to the right was led by older whites in a backlash against Johnson's civil rights efforts.

"The initial exodus of white Southerners from