

ANIMALS OF THE ANTARCTIC—THE ECOLOGY OF THE FAR SOUTH

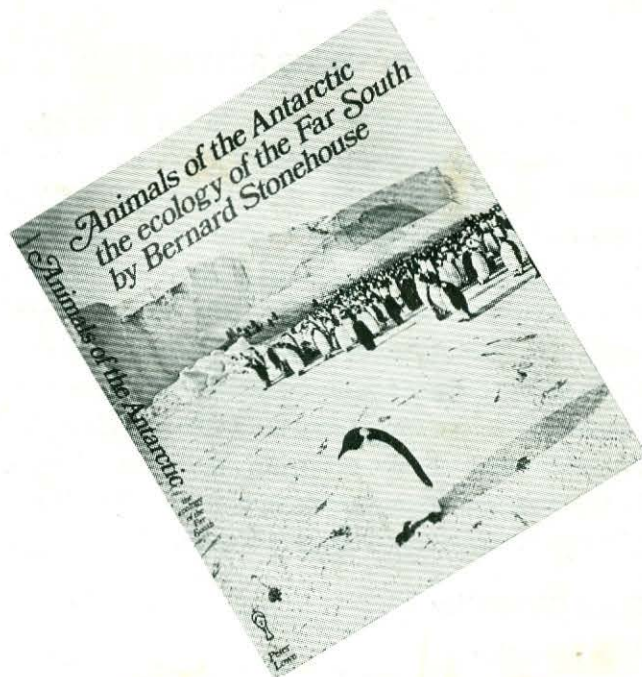
by Bernard Stonehouse

Eurobook Limited, Peter Lowe, London. 171 pages. £3.25.

This is certainly one of the most colourful books on the Antarctic and the sub-Antarctic islands to appear to date. Dealing with animal life in these regions and the impact that man has had on their environment, it is illustrated with over 200 high quality colour photographs. In this respect the book compares very well with other wild life books that have appeared, but in which Antarctic animals have been only touched on if mentioned at all. The biographical notes on the author tell us that Dr. Stonehouse trained as a biologist at London and Oxford Universities and has worked on polar and sub-polar ecology at the Universities of Canterbury, Yale and British Columbia. He has also gained first-hand experience by spending four winters and several summers in Antarctica.

The book is divided into 6 chapters. The first deals with the Antarctic continent and gives a most readable description of its geology, glaciology, geological history and climate. Wildlife is really introduced in Chapter 2 which describes the surrounding oceans, their plankton and the creatures which feed on the plankton. The Antarctic Islands are briefly covered in a chapter and the author then goes on to discuss the animals in more detail with a chapter on birds and one on mammals. The photography in both of these chapters (as in the rest of the book) is excellent.

The final chapter deals with 'Man and the Antarctic' and comments 'Man and the Antarctic are comparative strangers, only recently introduced and still ill-at-ease in each others company'. Stonehouse outlines the discovery of the continent and goes on to discuss the ravages of the early sealers. 'Gangs left ashore for the season killed every animal in sight, packing skins and



oil into casks to be picked up when their ship returned.' As a result of their ruthless efficiency, by the year 1800 the fur seals on the original seal islands were eliminated. They then pushed further south. The hunting of seals and penguins for oil continued long after the fur sealers had given up and these gangs 'moving from bay to bay, and from island to island, occasionally found and destroyed small colonies of fur seals left over from the earlier slaughter'.

Antarctic whaling began in 1904 and by 1949 it had become an impossible task to control the 'powerful, profitable, highly capitalized, fiercely competitive, multinational industry — one which had no intention of accepting controls other than its own terms.' Attempts to limit the slaughter met with failure. At present the Blue Whales are almost extinct and have been declared a protected species — only to make the Fin Whales the most sought after.

Animals on the Antarctic continent itself are largely protected by the signatories of the Antarctic Treaty. However, Stonehouse points out that 'the Treaty does not cover the high seas or the pack ice within the Antarctic region' and so 'the Antarctic Ocean, which holds practically all of the biological resources of the region, remains unprotected by any international agreement'. The most serious problem will face the Antarctic when man starts to harvest the krill in these waters, as all the Antarctic animals, directly or indirectly, survive on this. It would not take modern industry long to 'snatch this third and final harvest from the Antarctic Ocean'.

M.R.T.

