



Marriage: Penguins and Humans Propose

A Ritual That Transcends Gender and Species

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Nearly every human being is familiar with the ritual of receiving a diamond ring that symbolizes everlasting romantic commitment. This practice of proposal, however, is not unique to our species. A similar ritual is mimicked in the penguin world where one penguin offers the other a pebble to symbolize the relationship between the two that will turn into a bigger family. We share a peculiar compulsion with these Antarctic creatures: to offer our spouse a stone that suggests the desire to form a bond that lasts forever. Why do we share this ritual with penguins, and how does their tradition differ from ours?

Pebbles are used to build penguin nests. Thus the pebble marks the beginning of the penguin proposal. The pebble is typically dropped by a male at the feet of the female penguin to symbolize the start of their commitment to each other. Pebbles must be collected to prepare for a hatchling. The BBC Earth writes that "Birds in warmer climates have an abundance of twigs, leaves, and even shiny blue things to fluff out their nests with." In the Antarctic climate, penguins must do without these materials. Snow and ice melts through the stones of their nests, keeping the elements away from hatchlings. This allows the chicks to stay dry

and away from the ground. These nests help the hatched penguins remain above the surface of the water and consequently live to adulthood. The nests require weeks to build and are at danger from other penguins stealing the pebbles made to build them. It is hard work and difficult for penguins to acquire the necessary materials. A similar ritual occurs in the engagement ceremony of human beings. It is typically the males who acquire diamonds, minerals made of pure carbon. These are put onto bands that the females can wear on their fingers as symbols of loyalty. Diamonds are used for this ceremony because they are prized for their rarity and durability. A diamond can outlast the lifespan of a human being, and the cost of a diamond ring indicates an investment in the relationship. Diamonds became popular for engagements through European nobility who initially had the most access to them, and they became popular in the United States within the past two centuries after the opening of the DeBeers mines in Africa made them more accessible. They remained expensive but could now be purchased by the average person.

The pebble or diamond that a penguin or human offers to their partner represents a larger part of their lives. It is a gesture of

the bond that unites the couple. However, the penguin proposal holds wider value besides the symbolism of a diamond ring. The pebble represents the practical purpose of the need to build a nest for hatchlings. The human proposal holds more symbolism and tradition than that of the penguins' practicality.

The proposal follows specific guidelines that most human beings are well acquainted with: The man kneels to hold a diamond ring before the woman, then rises upon her acceptance or rejection of the proposal. Although common now, the diamond ring became a marker of an engagement in 1477 when Archduke Maximilian of Austria offered a diamond ring to later wife, Mary of Burgundy. There was already a custom nobles followed by offering each other jewelry with engagements, but this was the first implementation of the diamond ring as a symbol of lifelong union. This tradition also created the expectation that men would propose to women, a custom mirrored in penguins.

Male penguins are usually the ones offering the pebble to the female, dropping it at their partner's feet to initiate the relationship. Nonetheless, penguins are not always confined to this binary of gender roles known to human beings. According to Tish Hannan from the Sea Life Sydney Aquarium, "As penguin parents share equal responsibility of raising young, building and maintaining the nest, gender roles aren't as defined in penguins." Though female penguins produce the egg, they are not expected to bear most of the responsibility in raising the hatchling — both penguins feed and care for the chick. Typical human gender roles would allocate accountability for the hatchling based on the parents gender, but penguins are not limited by such expectations.

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Gender roles for humans are steeped deeply in tradition, with women being seen as figures who care for the household while men hold the position of being providers for their families. The diamond ring was the representation of a man's wealth and ability to provide for his family, the cost of the ring displaying this to society. Women who subvert this role to propose to the man are far less common even in the modern-day shifting of gender roles. Same sex couples, however, are not as limited when it comes to proposals. In these relationships, either spouse is able to propose without one person being expected more than the other. This subversion is mimicked in the penguin world, which is becoming more known for its same sex couples in aquariums around the world.

Similar to human beings, a penguin proposal is not confined to heterosexual partners. A well known couple in the Central Park Zoo were named Roy and Silo. They became popular in the '90s when they began the penguin ritual of proposal, despite not being able to produce an egg. A Tufts University article entitled "What's With All the Gay Penguins?" wrote that "after successfully incubating a rock and then a dummy egg, zookeepers decided to give the loving couple a real, fertilized egg." This egg would

produce a female penguin named Tango, who would go on to have a relationship with another female penguin named Tanzei. Same-sex penguin cases abound in aquariums, but the close resemblance between male and female penguins makes it difficult for scientists to study them in the wild. However, they theorize that it is possible that same-sex couples raise eggs in the wild that might otherwise be abandoned.

Penguins and humans share the ritual of a proposal that symbolizes a lifelong union, but there are many differences between the exact style that each species follows. Penguin proposals contain more practical elements to build a nest and a family, while human beings follow pre-established traditions that often fall into deeply rooted gender roles. The similarities between the two convey the ritual's importance. It also demonstrates the deeply entrenched traditions that human beings limit themselves to. Penguins do not have these defined categories of traditional gender roles that human beings confine themselves to, making their proposals less formal and more pragmatic. Fortunately, these gender-based expectations have evolved over time, but the love and commitment a proposal brings with it has not. The formula is known to us, and whether it is a pebble or a diamond being offered to symbolize something larger, proposals are not going anywhere — in people or penguins. ● ● ●

