

UOW women's Antarctic adventure

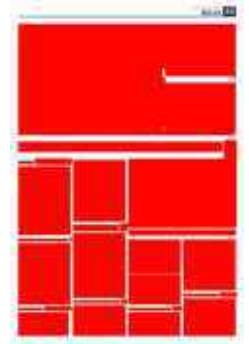
Illawarra Mercury

Saturday 30th December 2023

965 words

Page 35 | Section:

972cm on the page



University of Wollongong (UOW) academics Distinguished Professor Sharon Robinson, Dr Tamantha Stutchbury, Professor Danielle Skropeta and Dr Diana King at the Innovation Campus in Fairy Meadow after returning from Antarctica. Picture by Adam McLean



Antarctica scenery in November 2023. Picture supplied by Dr Diana King



UOW researcher Dr Diana King in Antarctica. Picture supplied by Dr Diana King

UOW women's Antarctic adventure

Marlene Even

Four University of Wollongong academics have returned from the Homeward Bound voyage in Antarctica to learn about leadership skills.

In the region showing some of the greatest impacts of climate change, 200 women and non-binary people from STEM backgrounds collaborated in November.

UOW Professor Danielle Skropeta said there's a saying for people who visit Antarctica:

"What happens in Antarctica, does not stay in Antarctica."

The four women sat in a Wollongong cafe, and despite the sounds of a coffee machine whirring in the background and the sticky heat of the humid summers day, when they spoke about the icy continent it was as if we were all transported to a completely different world.

WHERE ANIMALS DOMINATE

Dr Tamantha Stutchbury said she'll never forget the sounds of the Antarctica Peninsula.

"We were up next to a humpback whale that was sleeping and you could hear it breathing and snoring and in total quietness," she said.

They travelled among the shimmering blue icebergs, often sea birds interacted with the boat, an albatross with a two-metre wing span flew above.

Professor Skropeta said entering Antarctica is like "entering another realm" where the animals dominate.

"There are no people apart from research stations spotted in different areas, but generally it's the land of penguins and seals and glaciers," she said.

DR DIANA KING

Deputy program manager of Securing Antarctica's Environmental Future

"I've been doing Antarctic research since 2009 ... mostly researching how the vegetation is changing over that time."

Dr King has been researching how the vegetation has changed in Antarctica for 14

years but had written off the idea she'd ever visit the continent twice the size of Australia.

As an ambulatory wheelchair user, a person who can sometimes walk but often needs the assistance of a wheelchair, she didn't believe the trip would be accessible and worked in management sending others to the region.

"I've always done my research based on samples that people have been able to bring back for me," she said.

When Dr King had the opportunity to go on the voyage, in the most inclusive environment she said she's ever been in, it was quite emotional to see the vegetation up close.

"It was absolutely life-changing for me ... to have seen these things that I've been researching for so long."

DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR SHARON ROBINSON

Deputy director of Securing Antarctica's Environmental Future

"I work on how climate change affects the biodiversity in Antarctica."

Distinguished Professor Sharon Robinson first visited Antarctica in 1996, and has been on 13 expeditions.

"It's one of the most rapidly warming places on the planet. It's warmed several degrees in the last 50 years, and that's led to ice melt and retreated glaciers," she said.

Throughout July 2023, Antarctica averaged 13.5 million square kilometers of sea ice which is the lowest extent for winter since satellite records began in 1978.

"This year there was very little sea ice but a lot more evidence of glacial breakup ... so a lot of evidence that climate change is actually accelerating in that region."

DR TAMANTHA STUTCHBURY

Director of iAccelerate

"I work to help great research ideas get out of the uni, so I work at the interface between UOW research and industry."

Thanks to the Homeward Bound voyage Dr Tamantha Stutchbury said she has a new global network of women, who all lead in different ways.

She implores that the onus isn't on wom-



One of the Homeward Bound voyage ships in Antarctica in November 2023. Picture supplied by Dr Tamantha Stutchbury

en to bring a diverse range of leadership but instead a need to change social norms.

"We're really in that middle of a revolution of what makes a good leader and COVID-19 has changed that, but just generally the world has changed, and we need to make sure that those diversity of thoughts and diversity of ways of leading become the new norm," she said.

Dr Stutchbury's three leadership tips:

- Think about your visibility, what you want to say, and how you want to say it.

- Don't wait until you are overqualified to go for the next step.

- Pick tips from all the leaders that you've had. Pick the things you want to do and the things that you don't ever want to do and then embrace your own leadership style.

PROF DANIELLE SKROPETA

Associate Dean for higher degree research
"I do research on cancer drug development and in particular for ovarian cancer and pancreatic cancer."

Professor Danielle Skropeta works both as a professor in chemistry and assists PhD and master's students in the UOW Faculty of

Science Medicine and Health.

After seeing the effects of climate change in Antarctica she considers all her daily environmental choices.

"I've really seen the urgency that we have to do something now about reducing carbon emissions or reducing our carbon footprint, because what happens in Antarctica drives the weather patterns around the whole world," she said.

"A lot of the warming is being absorbed at the moment in the Southern Ocean and that's going to get to a critical point where it affects krill, and then that affects all the rest of the animal chain."

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Antarctica ambassadors advise people to think of the small ways they can cut their carbon footprint whether it's taking one less car journey a week or switching to green cleaning products.

They also recommend going meat-free for a week, collecting trash at a local park or beach, swapping to reusable bags, cutting your shower short by a few minutes, and saying no to plastic cutlery and drink bottles. Simple steps can make a difference.