THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

of

HISTORIC OCEAN DISPOSAL

in

THE CANADIAN ARCTIC

SUMMARY DOCUMENT

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Background

Many coastal communities in the Canadian Arctic have a recent history that involves the construction and operation of military sites. In particular the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line and Pole Vault (or Pinegap) Line of radar sites built in the late 1950s, had many ramifications for the Arctic environment (ESG 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1995a, Fletcher, 1990, Grant, 1988).

There are few available records of the activities that took place at the Arctic radar sites prior to 1989. In order to assess possible environmental impact, and to determine appropriate cleanup strategies, it has been necessary to reconstruct a picture of past practices. The Department of National Defence, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, and Environment Canada sponsored a series of environmental studies of the radar sites and several other military facilities in the Canadian Arctic. These investigations focused on terrestrial contaminant sources and redistribution and the ongoing environmental remediation of the sites (ESG, 1991, 1993a,b,c, 1994a, 1995a).

Among the initial environmental investigations of the radar sites were two studies examining the environmental impact of seabed debris and contaminant input into the marine environment (Bright *et al.*, 1994, ESG 1995b). Government agencies received anecdotal accounts suggesting that debris both from radar sites and northern communities had been directly disposed of into the ocean, either by transport of materials onto the ice or by dumping from ships or barges. The material suspected to have been disposed of in the ocean included large vehicles, and other iron-containing debris. However, ferrous metal debris is considered to be environmentally benign when placed in seawater.

There did not appear to be any motivation for the disposal of smaller hazardous materials (i.e. batteries and PCB-containing equipment) at sea, since in most cases this would require greater effort than the routine disposal of such materials in landfill sites. However, there is extensive evidence for the migration of PCBs or other contaminants from landfills and other contaminated terrestrial areas into marine environments adjacent to many of the radar installations and communities (ESG 1993c, 1995a). PCBs and a small suite of other contaminants tend to biomagnify in marine food webs. Since Arctic marine mammals comprise a substantial proportion of the diets of many Arctic residents, concern was expressed that ocean-dumped debris may impose a negative effect on these important Aboriginal food sources. This concern led to the following two investigations:

Study Sites

1. Cambridge Bay

In 1993, Environment Canada led an investigation into the effects of historical ocean disposal in the marine waters of Cambridge Bay (Bright *et al*., 1994). Cambridge Bay was believed to be a possible worst-case example for the past disposal of debris in the ocean, given its size and location, and anecdotal accounts of extensive dumping from both the adjacent DEW

Line site and the community. In addition, the results of an underwater survey conducted during the spring of 1993 had suggested that electrical components might be present on the seabed.

2. Baffin Region

In 1994, a second investigation of the extent and environmental effects of past ocean disposal took place in the eastern Arctic, in the waters near Iqaluit, Resolution Island, Cape Dyer, and Kivitoo, Nunavut (ESG 1995b, Bright *et al*., 1995). Disposal practices at east coast sites were thought to have differed from Cambridge Bay (central Arctic) due to the difference in terrain. Baffin Island and the Labrador are situated on very rugged terrain with limited access to overburden for the construction of landfills. Reimer *et al*. (1991, 1993) describe several sites where debris and chemical contaminants have been allowed to slide over a cliff and into the ocean (e.g. Cape Hooper, FOX-4). There are also anecdotal suggestions that debris may have been hauled onto the ice (e.g. Cape Dyer, DYE-M).

Objectives

The specific objectives of the ocean disposal studies were to:

- delineate the extent of debris in the sea near the study sites (both communities and military radar stations);
- determine the extent to which contaminants have been released from the debris; and,
- investigate the relative effects on Arctic marine animals of ocean disposal versus shore-based contaminant inputs.

Methods

A combination of methods was used during the two studies. Side-scan sonar was used to detect objects on the seabed. Objects on the seabed were identified on the basis of size, shape, and acoustic reflective characteristics. Once the side-scan sonar had established the position of the objects, temporary buoys were placed at the sites. The objects were subsequently examined in greater detail by SCUBA divers and/or Remote Operated Vehicles (ROVs) equipped with cameras and sector-scan sonar.

Samples of marine sediment, and of bottom-dwelling invertebrates and fish were collected from each of the sites and from background locations for comparison. Sediment and biota samples were analyzed for a large range of possible contaminants. Sediment samples were screened for inorganic elements, PCBs, PAHs. The tissues of a subset of biota were analyzed for inorganic elements, PAHs, PCBs, chlorinated pesticides, and toxaphene (or polychlorinated boranes). Detailed descriptions of collection and analytical methods are provided in by Bright *et al*., 1995.

Results

1. Cambridge Bay

Exhaustive sonar and remotely operated vehicle (video-equipped unmanned submersibles) and diver surveys of the bay revealed the presence of 54 objects or groups of objects, including natural rock outcroppings. A total of 44 of the objects were confirmed to be from dumped material: vehicles, two aircraft, and hundreds of empty barrels dominated the targets at the end of the bay near the DEW Line site; domestic garbage such as a kitchen sink, bedsprings and batteries were found nearer the community. Electronic components were found in only one area, adjacent to the airstrip.

Many of the submerged objects provided a solid substrate for marine life. Chemical analysis for a wide variety of contaminants indicated that the underwater debris did not significantly contribute to contamination in the bay. Shoreline sources of PCBs, both from the DEW Line site and especially the hamlet dump, were much more important. Sculpins (*Myoxocephalus quadricomis*) in the discharge of the community dumps had accumulated significant concentrations of PCBs, but other fish (Greenland Cod and Arctic Char) had much lower accumulations, with levels meeting consumption guidelines. It was concluded that Cambridge Bay was representative of sites in the central and western Arctic and that:

- debris from historical ocean disposal in the central and western Arctic was potentially quite extensive, but chemical contamination from such inputs was insignificant when compared to shoreline runoff;
- cleanup actions should be restricted to land and foreshore areas and not deep waters unless there is persuasive evidence to the contrary.

2. Baffin Region

Detailed searched of the waters adjacent to the Baffin region study sites revealed little debris. No objects were found in Sunneshine Fjord near Cape Dyer, nor near Kivitoo. Two barges and a third structure (either a barge or the remnants of an old causeway) were found in Koojesse Inlet (part of Frobisher Bay). Some isolated metal hull plates were all that remained of a ship that ran aground near Cape Warwick on Resolution Island in 1974. The sonar and photographic records confirmed that all of the areas are subject to extensive ice scouring of the sea floor, which had carried away any debris to deeper water. The absence of underwater debris in most areas investigated in the Baffin Region strongly suggests that past ocean disposal practices are not contributing to the present contamination of the marine environment.

A total of 76 sediment and 44 biological samples were collected during the study. Elevated levels of lead and arsenic were found within one metre of one of the objects found in Koojesse Inlet, near Innuit Head, however, the concentrations dropped to normal five metres away. The analysis of organic contaminants in the surface marine sediment and marine animals (isopods, soft-shelled clams and short-horn sculpins) showed that there is local contamination by

polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), near Iqaluit, Resolution Island and Cape Dyer. The inputs were clearly attributable to shoreline, rather than seabed, sources.

Conclusions

Overall, there was no evidence that historical ocean disposal activities at either Cambridge Bay or four sites on eastern Baffin Island have resulted in contaminant inputs to the surrounding marine environment, except within a few metres of an individual metal-containing objects. In contrast, there is substantial evidence that shoreline contaminant sources, including contaminated areas around radar sites and community dumps, are redistributed into the coastal marine environment. This information was communicated to government regulators, to the Hamlet Councils in Cambridge Bay and Iqaluit, the press, and to the Legislative Assembly of the Government of the Northwest Territories. Copies of the study reports (Bright *et al*., 1994 and 1995) were distributed to numerous libraries throughout Canada.

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*Note: The Environmental Sciences Group (ESG) was located at Royal Roads Military College, Victoria, British Columbia from 1989 to 1995, and now works out of the Royal Military College, Kingston, Ontario.