

2016 Nunavut Research Licence Renewal Application: Wayne Pollard

Project Title: An investigation of the sensitivity of high Arctic permafrost to climate change

Principal investigator: Dr. Wayne Pollard, Professor, Department of Geography, McGill University, 805 Sherbrooke St. W. Montreal, Quebec. H3A 0B9

2016 Research Team: Wayne Pollard (PI), Chris Omelon, Dale Andersen, Denis Lacelle, Michael Templeton (M.Sc.), Melissa Ward (Ph.D.) and an undergraduate field assistant from McGill – This is a university-based research project.

2016 Fieldwork Schedule: Planned fieldwork July 15- August 30.

2016 Field sites: The Eureka area on the Fosheim Peninsula, Ellesmere Island (80°00'N 85°95'W), and Expedition Fiord area, Axel Heiberg Island (79°25'N; 90°45'W). We will be based most of the time at the Eureka Weather Station.

Funding source: Discovery Grant from the Natural Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC). Logistical support is provided by the Polar Continental Shelf Program

Project Overview:

This is an ongoing project that examines how global warming, in particular warm summer temperatures, is affecting the stability of high Arctic permafrost conditions, landscapes and infrastructure. There are 4 main aims: (1) to identify and measure changes in different landscapes (e.g. tundra, polar desert, wet lands, shorelines), (2) to assess local climate variability, (3) to evaluate the nature and extent of ground ice in permafrost and its vulnerability to climate change, (4) to determine the amount and rate of landscape change caused by warming and melting permafrost (thermokarst). A secondary aim is to assess the degree to which these changes impact fuel contaminated soils. The significance on this project is reflected in the dramatic increase in melting permafrost observed in 2011 and 2012. The information collected in this study will improve our general understanding of how climate and permafrost interact which will allow for the better prediction of future changes. This research also has a significant training component involving students on several levels.

Progress Report – 2015 Scientific Research Licence #02 020 15R-M (multiyear)

In 2015 fieldwork focussed on sites in the Eureka Sound lowlands on Ellesmere Island and Expedition fiord Axel Heiberg Island. My students and I based our work from the Eureka weather station for a period 15 days (July 1 – July 15) during which we repeated on going measurements of thaw slump retreat and ice wedge subsidence around the Environment Canada weather station, runway and DND base. Fieldwork planned for the at Expedition Fiord area of Axel Heiberg Island had to be cancelled due to limited logistical support. At Eureka our activities included detailed geomorphic, dGPS, GPR and vegetation surveys in areas of natural thermokarst. Ice and soil samples were collected to determine carbon and ice content and ground ice origin. Total Soil Carbon contents in the active layer are extremely low < 1% in most areas, but slightly higher in (2-3%) in wetlands. The pattern of thawing permafrost was similar to 2013 & 2014 and is much lower than seen in 2011 & 2012. The Eureka area contains extensive massive ground ice deposits (massive ground ice refers to thick (3-10m) layers of nearly pure ice) beneath 1-4 m of marine sediments. The presence of massive ice makes this area extremely vulnerable to thaw subsidence and erosion. My work in the Eureka Sound Lowlands over the past 2 decades has identified at least 10 ground ice

hotspots where ground ice represents a significant part of the near surface permafrost although since 2011 we have noticed thermokarst activity and ground ice everywhere below 150 M asl.. In 2012 we reported an unprecedented level of thermokarst (250+ retrogressive thaw slumps) but in 2015 the pattern was greatly reduced. PhD student M. Becker has completed his research on the impact of thawing ice wedges and found that ice wedge thaw drives a stabilizing change in vegetation. The monitoring of retrogressive thaw slump retreat is part of new PhD research by M. Ward. In addition to field mapping areas of thermokarst Ward is using satellite imagery to map and monitor landscape scale changes. July fieldwork included ground penetrating radar surveys of ice wedges and massive ice deposits, sampling of ground ice and aerial surveys.

2016 Field Program.

The aim of my 2016 field program is to continue my investigations on how climate change will affect ice-rich permafrost and in particular rates of thermokarst. My 2016 field program will continue to focus on: (1) the analysis of the stability of ice-rich permafrost in response to changes in the active layer, and (2) analysis of changes in ice wedge morphology. The latter includes 2 new students (M. Templeton – MSc and C. Grand'Maison BSc. The measurement of changes occurring in the active layer remains a key focus as well as identifying connections between the atmosphere, active layer and permafrost. Fieldwork is planned for the Expedition Fiord area on Axel Heiberg Island (79°25'N; 90°43'W) and the Eureka area on Ellesmere Island (79°59'N; 85°49'W). These sites were selected in 2012 because they are representative of common ecosystems, because of their accessibility, availability of baseline data, and existing research facilities. Together this research will assess the sensitivity of key permafrost systems to warming by defining the surface temperature fluxes in the active layer and at the active layer permafrost interface. This study will identify critical thresholds of non-recoverable change known as tipping points, and potential feedbacks. In 2016 we are asking 3 questions: (1): To what extent are current changes in the landscape due to climate change? (2) To what extent does the active layer buffer the permafrost system through complex feedbacks linked to the way energy interacts with soil and thawing? And (3) what are the mechanisms that cause ice wedge polygons to collapse so rapidly? Activities planned for 2016 include: (a) ongoing measurement of changes in the ground surface using a high resolution gps system coupled with ground penetrating radar. These data will be included in a geographic information system and will be used to georeference satellite images, (b) monitoring active layer processes and the measurement of temperature and moisture changes in mid-summer. This will involve the collection of sediment and ice samples from the active layer on top of permafrost, and (c) continued aerial surveys of changes throughout the Fosheim Peninsula.

Significance:

My research has made a significant contribution to the understanding of permafrost and ground ice conditions in the high Arctic. It provides new insights into the origin and age of permafrost systems, rates of change and the potential vulnerability of ice cored landforms. The magnitude of warming projected for the high Arctic will have significant effects on both the ecology and geomorphology of the region. This work is even more important given the increased level of mineral exploration interests in this area.

W. Pollard



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