

2014 Nunavut Research Licence Renewal Application: Wayne Pollard

2013 Scientific Research #02 008 13R-M (multi-year)

Project Title: The permafrost hydrology and environmental significance of perennial springs in the Expedition Fiord area, Axel Heiberg Island

Project Leader: Wayne Pollard, Department of Geography, McGill University, 805 Sherbrooke St. W. Montreal, Quebec, H3A 0B9

2014 Research Team: Wayne Pollard, Melissa Ward, Dale Andersen, and 1 student field assistant.

2014 Fieldwork: Planned fieldwork includes April 15-24,

2014 Field sites: Sites on Axel Heiberg Island, including Expedition Fiord area (79° 25'N; 90° 45'W), Strand Fiord (79° 05'N; 90° 00'W), Whitsunday Bay (79°05'N; 87°00'W), – same as previous years

Funding source: Natural Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) with logistical support from the Polar Continental Shelf Program.

Project Overview: This is an ongoing project concerned with the study of the hydrology and geomorphology of cold hyper-saline groundwater flow at several locations on Axel Heiberg Island. These springs are very unusual and provide valuable insights into permafrost conditions and the hydrology in cold deep permafrost. Preliminary results indicate that there are 2-3 different types of springs and that the local geology, specifically the formation of salt domes may have an impact on permafrost conditions. The primary goal of this research is to understand how cold (~0°C), salty groundwater interacts with permafrost and the high Arctic polar desert environment (ecosystem). A second goal is to determine how these springs modify their surrounding landscape, and a third goal is to explain the unusual landforms associated with salt precipitates. Specific aims include: (1) to assess the geographic extent of this type of groundwater system, (2) to determine the source of the groundwater, (3) to understand and explain landforms and processes related to the interaction between groundwater and permafrost, and (4) to describe the microbiology of springs, lakes and permafrost. Over the past few years our studies have provided new information about the limiting conditions of water and microbial life related to cold temperatures and a better understanding about landforms related to groundwater. This is the only research on cold perennial springs being conducted in the high Arctic. These springs have no commercial value and our research is driven entirely by purely scientific questions.

Progress Report – 2013 Fieldwork. In 2013 a new MSc student (Melissa Ward) began thesis based research on the hyper-saline springs located at Whitsunday Bay and Strand Fiord. However, bad weather and logistical problems prevented us from getting to our field sites in a planned April field trip. A second field trip in from July 7-14 was more successful, Ms Ward was

able to measure temperature and flow rate measurements, collect water and salt samples, and make detailed measurements of the morphology of the various landforms produced by salt precipitation. We completed annual dGPS surveys of the ice and mound formations around the springs at Gypsum Hill, collected data from automatic weather stations as well as completing snow surveys (the latter are baseline data that form the core of environmental monitoring and climate change studies). The climate data indicate that 2012 was an average to low snow year but colder than average air temperatures. Spring melt was the latest we have seen in more than 20 years with complete snow cover remaining until early July. A July maximum temperature of 6C and winter minimum of -52C were recorded. Aerial surveys of springs in other locations on Axel Heiberg Island planned for June were not possible because of weather problems and widespread snow cover. Analyses of salt deposits indicate the presence of a hydrated form of salt called hydrohalite, although not uncommon chemically the formation of large hydrohalite tufa structures is considered very unusual.

2014 Field Program: For 2014 we are planning a late winter project designed to observe spring discharge and hydrohalite formation at Whitsunday Bay and Strand Fiord (Axel Heiberg Island). Fieldwork will be conducted from April 15 to 23 and will involve Pollard, Ward, Andersen and an Inuit field assistant. This work is based at the McGill Field Station at Expedition Fiord with day trips to field sites. The April observations are extremely important because it allows us to observe the nature and pattern of groundwater flow under cold conditions as well as allowing me to evaluate processes that occurred during the previous dark season. Field work at this time of year provides easier access to most of my study sites. Ward's fieldwork will continue to focus on understanding the behaviour of saline groundwater under cold air temperatures and in particular the formation of surface ice deposits, frost mound structures and hydrohalite precipitates. We will collect water samples (~1 litre) for hydro-chemical analyses that will be compared with previous year's observations. These analyses document changes underground flow systems and the importance of chemistry on both physical and biological processes. These studies improve our understanding about the physical, chemical and biological processes occurring within these spring systems. Field activities will also include mapping of ice and spring deposits, snow surveys and the collection of data from several automatic weather stations.

Significance: The results of this research provide new and valuable information about the behaviour of water in cold permafrost. Together with my students and colleagues we have identified important geological characteristics related to perennial spring occurrence as well as new and unusual biological features. The results of this work have lead to partnerships with NASA who believe that these springs may help in the planning for the exploration of Mars. My students and I are the only researchers in Canada doing this type of research.

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