



# Antarctic-style glaciation of Baffin Island 20,000 years ago

Jason Briner and Gifford Miller, University of Colorado

Twenty-thousand years ago, during the height of the last Ice Age, Baffin Island probably looked a lot like Antarctica does today. Our team of researchers from the University of Colorado is conducting research on the land surrounding Clyde River, searching for clues about the extent and dynamics of the Laurentide Ice Sheet. The Laurentide was a circular ice sheet that covered most of Canada, similar in shape and size to the ice sheet in Antarctica today. It existed from about 110,000 years ago to about 6,000 years ago, growing and shrinking during that time, but probably reaching its largest form about 20,000 years ago.

As we learn more, we are discovering that the Laurentide Ice Sheet probably behaved like the Antarctic ice sheet. It was comprised of fast-moving, low-gradient ice streams that brought ice from the interior to the Baffin Bay and Labrador Sea coastlines. In between these ice streams (which filled Hudson Strait, Cumberland Sound, and the fiords along the northeastern coast of Baffin Island), there was slow-moving ice that didn't modify the landscape like the erosive ice streams did.

This overall picture of the Laurentide Ice Sheet is based on many decades of research, but we've had some recent breakthroughs as a result of our work near Clyde River. Most of the important information that we're gathering today is based on a new technique that helps us understand the past dynamics of the ice sheet: cosmogenic exposure dating.

Cosmogenic exposure dating is a technique that has allowed us to learn when the ice sheet last covered Clyde River. Here's how it works: cosmic rays that bombard the Earth's surface alter the chemical make-up of rock surfaces. We understand the rate at which this happens, and we can process rock samples in our laboratory at the University of Colorado to find out how much alteration has taken place in rocks on Baffin Island. The longer a rock is exposed at the surface, the more altered it is by cosmic rays. Because glaciers and ice sheets pick up boulders and deposit them at their snouts, we can determine when an ice sheet existed in the past by doing cosmogenic exposure dating on those glacial boulders.

The glacial boulders on the land surrounding Clyde River are evidence that the Laurentide Ice Sheet covered Clyde River sometime during the last Ice Age. Our current research, based on the results of cosmogenic exposure dating, has revealed that it was about 20,000 years ago. But, this isn't new. This result was almost predictable because there have been similar findings elsewhere on Baffin Island. We made a more startling discovery by investigating some of the highlands that surround Clyde Inlet.

For at least a century, Arctic researchers have observed that fiords go hand-in-hand with upland plateaus that exist in between fiords. And they've noted that while the fiords feature fresh bedrock that was scoured by glaciers in the past, the upland surfaces are

highly weathered and therefore may have never been glaciated. When our team investigated the upland surfaces near Clyde River, we were surprised to find conspicuous boulders that reminded us of the same glacial boulders seen at lower-elevations.

By using cosmogenic exposure dating, we were able to test the idea that these conspicuous boulders on the uplands were deposited by glaciers. We discovered that the boulders were deposited during the same time that similar boulders were being deposited on the lowlands, about 20,000 years ago. But, the upland surfaces upon which the glacial boulders lie are at least hundreds of thousands of years old.

Our findings paint an interesting picture. Landforms indicative of fast-moving erosive ice are found in Clyde Inlet, and date to about 20,000 years ago. At the same time, glacial boulders were deposited directly on the ancient upland surfaces adjacent to Clyde Inlet, which requires very slow moving and inactive ice. This data compiled together indicates that the fast-moving ice stream that occupied Clyde Inlet was bounded on either side by slow moving ice which covers the uplands. This reconstruction is very similar to how the Antarctic ice sheet behaves today.

During the next three years of research around Clyde River, we will refine our reconstruction, and learn more about the details of the behavior of the Laurentide Ice Sheet. A major concern presently is the unknown behavior of the Antarctic ice sheet, and the implications for raising sea levels as it melts. Just a few days before this was written, 60% of the Larsen B ice shelf (one of many ice shelves that surround Antarctica) calved into the southern ocean. While the melting of floating ice shelves doesn't impact global sea levels, their disintegration can destabilize adjacent land-based portions of the ice sheet. By studying the behavior of the Laurentide Ice Sheet, we will be closer to understanding how the Antarctic ice sheet works, and what to expect in the near future.





—

1

—

