

2010 Nunavut Research Licence Renewal Application: Wayne Pollard

Research Licence # 0200909R-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, McGill University,

2010 Research Team: Miles Ecclestone (Trent U.), Marco Zentilli (Dalhousie U.), Sarah Hall (McGill) Laura Thompson (U. Western Ontario) and 1 student field assistant.

2010 Fieldwork: Planned fieldwork includes a) March 26-April 16, and b) June 25-July 10.

2010 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), and Bunde Fiord (81°55'N ; 79°30'W) – same sites as previous years

Funding source: Natural Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC)

Introduction: This is an ongoing project concerned with the study of the hydrology and geomorphology of cold saline groundwater flow at several locations on Axel Heiberg Island. The primary aim of this research is to understand how cold, saline ground water interacts with the cold high Arctic environment and how it affects the surrounding landscape. Specific aims include (1) to determine the extent of this type of ground water system, (2) to determine the source and age of the ground water, (2) to understand and explain landforms and processes related to the interaction between groundwater and permafrost, and (3) to describe the microbial communities associated with 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 ground water. 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 scientific questions.

Progress Report – 2009 fieldwork. Between March 25-April 20 we undertook a series of measurements of the temperature and flow rates of springs at Expedition Fiord. Because of logistical limitations we were not able to make similar measurement at our sites at Strand Fiord and Whitsunday Bay. We collected water samples to analyze for chemistry and environmental isotopes. I undertook a detailed GPS survey of the ice formations around the springs at Gypsum Hill. I collected data from our automatic weather station as well as completing our snow surveys. These data indicate that 2008 was a low snow year but fairly typical with a July maximum of +12C and winter minimum of -52 C. Between April 7-14 we hosted 2 Ranger patrols. In late June I conducted aerial surveys of springs in other locations on Axel Heiberg Island as well as looking for new springs.

2010 Proposed Research: This year I will continue to do both winter (March-April) and summer (June-July) periods of fieldwork. The first is a 3 week field program beginning in late

March involving a small group of researchers based at the McGill Field Station at Expedition Fiord. Observations at this time of year are extremely important because it allows us to confirm the nature and pattern of ground water flow over the previous dark season. Also the frozen conditions allow us to access all of our study sites. Our work includes the characterization of saline surface flow under cold air temperatures and the formation of surface ice deposits and frost mound structures. We will collect more water samples for chemical analyses and by comparing these data with previous years we are able to better document changes hydrology and the importance of chemistry on both physical and biological systems. This research improves our understanding about the physical, chemical and biological processes occurring within these spring systems. Other field activities include subsurface mapping using ground penetrating radar, snow surveys and the collection of data from 6 automatic weather stations. In June we will continue to search for other active and relic spring sites that may exist on Axel and Ellesmere Islands. Field work will involve (a) measurement outflow temperatures, flow rates and chemistry of these spring systems, (b) sampling for microbial activity, (c) climate monitoring and (d) sampling and analysis of mineral precipitates. We will visit by helicopter sites where other springs are known to occur, including Whitsunday Bay, Strand Fiord, Middle Fiord, Bunde Fiord, Skaere Fiord and Wolf Fiord. Samples from springs, lakes, surface runoff, soils and precipitation will be collected for chemical and biological analyses. We will continue our GPS mapping of the location of spring outlets, flow paths and structures. At this time of year we repair and replace sensors on our network of automatic weather stations. We will be based as the McGill field station at Expedition Fiord. Since our work is concerned with understanding the polar environment our activities have very little or no impact.

Significance: This research strives to understand the unique nature and behaviour of the cold saline springs in the deep permafrost of Axel Heiberg Island. This research provides insights into the surface and subsurface hydrology in a region of thick, continuous permafrost and the nature of micro organisms surviving the physical and chemical extremes often found in polar environments. In addition, insight gained from my work on springs can be used to better understand how life may exist on other planets like Mars.

Translation by Susan Salluviniq, Resolute Bay

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