

## **2012 Nunavut Research Licence Renewal Application: Wayne Pollard**

### **Scientific Research #02 052 10R-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,

**2012 Research Team:** Wayne Pollard, Chris Omelon, Melissa Ward, Alfonso Davila, Dale Andersen, Chris McKay and 1 student field assistant.

**2012 Fieldwork:** Planned fieldwork includes April 5-17, and June 28-July 10.

**2012 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), Bunde Fiord (81°55'N ; 79°30'W) – same as previous years

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

**Overview:** 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. These springs are very unusual and provide valuable insights in to permafrost hydrology. The primary goal of this research is to understand how cold (~0°C), saline groundwater interacts with permafrost and the high Arctic polar desert environment (ecosystem). A second goal is to assess how these springs affect the surrounding landscape. Specific aims include: (1) to determine the distribution and geographic extent of this type of groundwater system, (2) to determine the source and age 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 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 – 2010 fieldwork.** Between March 25-April 10 we undertook measurements temperature and flow rate measurements for 2 groups of springs at Expedition Fiord. For the second year in a row we had problems with logistical support (PCSP) and were not able to complete most of our planned field studies, in particular we were not able to get to either Strand Fiord or Whitsunday Bay. However, I was able to collect water samples for ongoing monitoring of chemistry and environmental isotopes at Colour Peak and Gypsum Hill. I also completed annual GPS 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). These data indicate that 2010 was again a low snow year but fairly typical temperatures with a July maximum of + 10C and winter minimum of -48C. We did however experience heavy snow

accumulations in April and again in late July. July snow also caused significant logistical problems. Aerial surveys of springs in other locations on Axel Heiberg Island planned for June were not possible due to logistical problems. In July we began fieldwork at a site very close to the Gypsum Hill spring that we believe is an inactive spring (old no longer flowing). This site is important because it will provide information about the geology that controls their occurrence.

**2012 Proposed Research:** I am again planning both late winter and summer periods of fieldwork, including: 2 weeks field beginning in early April and 2 weeks in late June, in both cases this work is based at the McGill Field Station at Expedition Fiord. The April observations are extremely important because it allows me 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. My work 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 precipitates. I will collect water samples (~1 litre) for hydrochemical 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 ground penetrating radar mapping of ice and spring deposits, snow surveys and the collection of data from several automatic weather stations. In June I will look for more active and relic spring sites that may exist on Axel and Ellesmere Islands. June 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. I will visit springs at Expedition, Strand and Bunde Fiords as well as Whitsunday Bay. I will collect samples from springs, lakes, surface runoff, soils and precipitation will be collected for chemical and biological analyses. I will dGPS map the location of spring outlets, flow paths and structures. I will repair and replace sensors on our network of automatic weather stations. This work will be based as the McGill field station at Expedition Fiord.

**Significance:** The results of this research are providing 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. I am the only person in Canada doing this type of research.

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