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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

BAFFIN ISLAND
EXPEDITION

1985

PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Introduction

The idea of having a University Expedition to Baffin Island was conceived in January 1984. By the beginning of the Summer of that year, a team had been brought together and contact had been made with the Expedition Advisory Centre at the Royal Geographical Society in London.

At this early stage the motives for going on the Expedition were substantially adventurous, although three members of the team were at that time Environmental Science Undergraduates, and it was anticipated that the scientific side of the Expedition would be related to that course.

The Scientific Programme

During the Summer and Autumn of 1984, we approached several notable authorities who had, or were at that time, carrying out work in glaciology on Baffin and the Expedition was also discussed with members of the Department of Geography, at Southampton University.

As a result of comments made by Professor J.T. Andrews of the Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research at Boulder, Colorado, and Professor Gilbert of Queen's University, Kingston, Canada, it was decided that the scientific aims of the Expedition should be two-fold:

- i. To obtain data on rates of sediment discharge from the side streams feeding the Weasel River, on the Cumberland Peninsula.
- ii. To obtain data on rates of moraine development in the same area.

Once these aims had been established much time was spent in acquiring the necessary equipment, and learning the practical scientific techniques needed.

Expedition Training

During the Winter and Spring of 1985, the Expedition had two training sessions. The aims of these training sessions were as follows:

- i. To learn and become familiar with the Scientific techniques that would be used during the Expedition.
- ii. To assess the suitability of the Expedition members, and to enable the members to get to know one another.
- iii. To test equipment.

The first training session was held in the Northern Pennines in December. The weather during this training session was cold and snowy, and as a result the training was very worthwhile and much was learned. The second training session was held in the Brecon Beacons in the Spring. This was shorter than had been planned because of transport problems, and the work load of the team members in the run up to our Final Examinations. This fact, together with the warm weather meant that the training session was only of limited value.

(In retrospect, it would perhaps have been more prudent had the training sessions been carried out before the final team was selected.)

Expedition Logistics

i. Travel

As expected, travel proved to be the single greatest expense, accounting for over 50% of the Expedition budget. Various different itineraries were considered, including flying with the R.A.F. to Resolute Bay. However in the end, the Expedition was forced to fly with commercial airlines, following the route adopted by past expeditions to the Cumberland Peninsula. (Heathrow - Montreal - Frobisher Bay - Pangnirtung.)

ii. Equipment

The Expedition Equipment totalled approximately 500 kg, and consisted of scientific, camping and mountaineering equipment. All equipment went out to Baffin with the Expedition members and was not sent by sea or as Air Freight, due to the length of time available for packing the equipment before departure.

iii. Food

Following the advice of past expeditions it was decided that half the Expedition's food would be purchased in England, and half purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company at Pangnirtung. Unfortunately it was not possible to obtain prices of food at the Hudson's Bay Company before departure, if it had been possible to do so the Expedition would have taken a much larger proportion of its food from England. Future Expeditions Take Note.

iv. Fund-Raising

As is no doubt the case in most expeditions, the biggest headache during the planning phase was raising sufficient funds.

To date the Expedition has cost in excess of £12,000, all of which has been raised in less than twelve months. The Expedition received financial support from the Royal Geographical Society, the Mount Everest Foundation, the Gino Watkins Memorial Fund, Southampton University and over 100 British companies, as well as many other individuals and organisations.

The Field Phase

The Expedition left Southampton as planned on the morning of Sunday 14th July, two days after all but one of the Expedition members had graduated. Our outward flight from Heathrow was delayed by 6 hrs which was not a very promising start.

However we arrived in Montreal in due course, where we changed airports during the night and flew on up to Frobisher Bay - the Capital of Baffin Island. Our 3 hour stay in Frobisher Bay was very demoralising, and left all the Expedition members feeling very depressed. This was probably caused by our tiredness and the 'shanty-town' appearance of the place.

At Frobisher Bay we first encountered the Arctic Mosquitoes which we had all heard so much about. They gave us more trouble during our short stay in Frobisher Bay than at any other time throughout the Expedition. We were all very happy to leave Frobisher Bay as we embarked on the 45 minute flight through low cloud to Pangnirtung, where we arrived to find that almost the whole village had turned out to see the plane in.

The day after our arrival in Pangnirtung was spent organising transport for our trip to the head of the Fjord (Overlord Peak), and in purchasing the remainder of our food from the Hudson Bay store. However the food proved to be considerably more expensive than anticipated, and as a result we were forced to substantially cut back on our rations; a decision which took its toll later in the Expedition.

The following fortnight was spent carrying loads from the head of the Fjord to our Base Camp at Summit Lake, a distance of about twenty-five miles. Each member of the Expedition did the trip three or four times during this period, and over 700 man miles were walked. The terrain in the valley through which we travelled to Base Camp varied greatly. The monotonous mudflats at the head of the Fjord changed to a desert-like scenery of barren rocks and drifting sand dunes, which in turn gave way to the lush greenery of Arctic Cotton Grass dotted with tiny flowers.

Being a heavily glaciated area meant that our progress was often slowed by the vast moraines that lay across our path, abandoned by the retreating ice.

Following the arrival of the scientific members of the Expedition at Base Camp, a detailed field programme was drawn up; on the sediment sampling side there was a certain urgency in starting to collect samples, because of our very limited time in the area. As it was, the first readings were taken on the 24th July. The other scientific object had, unfortunately to be abandoned because the moraine which we had hoped to survey was lying with very steep sides and due to its instability rockfalls were seen to occur on most days. As the proposed work would have meant the Expedition members remaining on the slopes for many hours each day, and as it was the moraine had to be crossed twice daily in order to obtain water samples for sediment analysis, it was felt that to carry out the proposed work would constitute too great a risk.

As an alternative to this, it was decided to make a detailed map of the glacier snout from which the meltwater streams of interest to the Expedition emerged. This was done so that a record could be made of moraine and fluvial deposits. Should the area be revisited by an expedition carrying out similar studies, any changes in the nature of the deposits will be apparent.

A detailed report of all the scientific work carried out will appear in the Expedition Report, together with the results and a discussion.

While the scientific work was being carried out, the members of the Expedition not involved in it went off in groups of three or four to explore the surrounding glaciers and mountains. These small trips proved a great success and although only one mountain was climbed, many glaciers and passes were explored.

The weather throughout the Expedition was mainly fine with hardly any rain, although some members did experience an Arctic blizzard on 4th August, which necessitated a hasty retreat from Mount Thor.

The Expedition began to move out on 20th August, and by the evening of the 25th was back in Pagnirtung. The last few days of the Expedition were spent with the Inuit in Pagnirtung, where all the Expedition members started the process of putting on the weight lost during the previous six weeks. This process was assisted by the very reasonably priced fresh produce that was available, namely seal (eaten both cooked and raw) and Arctic Char.

During this period an insight was gained into the lifestyle of the local Inuit, and of some of the many problems that they are at present faced with as a result of their rapidly altering way of life.

Acknowledgements

To conclude this brief report it only remains for me to thank those organisations and individuals, too numerous to list here, without whose assistance it would not have been possible to mount the Expedition.