

Feelgood Adventures

Contributed by Martin Ferguson
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With global warming a major concern can travel ever be conscience free?

Helping to protect the environment by travelling has an oxymoron ring about it these days though volunteering for an organisation such as Earthwatch can help calm an overheating conscience and provide a great adventure. Martin Ferguson checks out the mountains of Canada.

Dechen la’ - ‘land at the end of the sticks’ in the local Kaska language - was the evocative destination for our expedition. Here, in the Mackenzie Mountains, taiga meets tundra. Stunted willow and birch shrubs make way for sedges, lichens and mosses, offering a telling juxtaposition of ecosystems for measuring the impact of climate change.

Our 1958, single-engine Otter bumps through unseen air pockets in the broken cloud as we skim over Macmillan Pass. We skirt dark, brooding rock faces which contrast vividly with glaciers sparkling in the northern summer sun.

Eleven volunteers, we are participating in an Earthwatch research expedition named ‘Climate Change at the Arctic’s Edge’. We had assembled for the first time just a couple of hours earlier, outside the Alkan Air hangar in Whitehorse. Our origins spanned France, Great Britain, Switzerland and USA; diverse backgrounds joined by a keen interest in planet earth and a common desire to address the damage wrought by man.

We are headed for Camp 222, so named because it lies at mile 222 on the Canol Road. This relic of World War II follows a short-lived oil pipeline. Constructed in 1942-44 to carry crude oil to a refinery in Whitehorse, the aim was to supply fuel to troops stationed in Alaska and NW Canada to ward off the then advancing Japanese. Today, the route survives as a hiking and biking trail, reputed to be the most challenging in the whole of Canada. More importantly for us, it provides access for research projects and for hunting and mining companies to this remote area.

Pete Kershaw –Earthwatch Lead Scientist - is waiting to greet us, dressed in his legendary T-shirt and shorts, no matter what the outside temperature. Brief introductions complete, we board a Pinzgauer four-wheel drive. The Pinzgauer is of Austrian manufacture. This one was previously owned by the Swiss army and had spent time during the recent conflicts in the Balkans. It is an amazingly strong vehicle, capable of negotiating just about any kind of terrain, from sand to water to the most jumbled rock slide. It soon becomes apparent why we need such a mode of transportation as we push forwards at little more than walking pace along the frost heaved Canol Road.

Some two hours and ten miles later, Dechen la's Lodge comes into view. This is to be our home and base for the next nine days. Constructed of timbers recycled from frost-heaved bridges on the Canol Road, it commands a spectacular panorama of the Mackenzie Mountain Barrens. Located at 1,700 metres, the world's largest herd of mountain caribou roam here, as well as moose, sub-Arctic wolves, wolverine, grizzlies, and a host of smaller creatures such as marmots, ground squirrels, pikas, and voles. Over 130 species of birds have been recorded here, including the soaring golden eagle and such Arctic specialties as gyrfalcons, ptarmigan (three different species), wandering tattlers, long-tailed jaegers, longtailed (oldsquaw) ducks, and Smith's longspurs.

Breathtaking changes of light span the 17 hours of daylight as they play on the backdrop of mountains. These include the twin, glacier-clad Keele Peaks, both more than 2,952 metres high and last sentinels on the Continental Divide before the Arctic Circle.

That evening after a hearty, home-cooked meal, Pete introduces the project to us. This remote and rugged range, part of the largest mountain wilderness in North America, is at the very centre of a global calamity in the making. Climate change is thawing the world's permafrost, which has locked away at least 20 percent of the world's terrestrial carbon in the form of peat. When these peatlands thaw, they will release carbon dioxide and methane, greenhouse gases that will accelerate the warming trend. These changes stand to alter the ecology of arctic plants and animals, as well as those in ecosystems around the world. Our purpose is to add to the 17 years of accumulated project data that measure changes to permafrost landforms.

An early start transports us back to Camp 222 from where we branch out to take measurements at two different palsa sites. These are located in the valley bottom of Dale Creek, a tributary of the Tsichu River which eventually joins the mighty Mackenzie River flowing into the Arctic Ocean. Here in the valley bottom, the tundra merges with bare scree slopes and rock glaciers.

"An awesome day" is Pete's summation as he cracks open the Glennivert. This evening, we are treated to caribou, washed down with wine and pure, fresh stream water. Our meal is tempered by a little sadness in knowing that such a beautiful beast has been consumed by us but we are soon reminded that this is part of living off the land and are told that the meat has been brought by one of the first nation visitors to the lodge.

Two members of our group accept an invitation to sleep out under the northern stars. Exhausted, I retire to my bed.

The programme of the next days includes getting increasingly adept with the instrumentation and performing our measurements at a total of six sites. By the end of the study, we evolve into a tightly-knitted group, well-versed in the methods and routines of data recording on the hand-held palm computers.

One of our highlights comes towards the end of our adventure. As the team returns to the Pinzgauer with the promise of yet another delicious dinner, progress is curtailed by the sighting of a grizzly bear just 100 meters ahead of us. Our bear friend seems to have taken up residence beside the Pinzgauer. Following several photo shoots, much hullabalooing is required before our grizzly lopes off slowly up the road. What a privilege it is to share this remote place with such a magnificent creature!

Pete tells us that results from the Mackenzie Mountains studies will be compared to those from a second study location in Churchill, Manitoba where there is continuous permafrost and the trees reach their latitudinal limit. The aim is to compare responses to climate change at both alpine and arctic treelines where ecosystems are especially sensitive to change. Pete has been working in the Mackenzie Mountains region since the early 1970s and the research data are showing clear signs of a reduction in the permafrost and a degeneration of the landforms. Earthwatch volunteers make it possible to have large numbers of samples taken over a short time period. The approach requires repetitive sampling within the 10 long-term environmental monitoring sites. However, as we can testify, rotation of tasks keeps the work from feeling tedious.

Our last day comes all too soon and, as noon approaches, the ageing Alkan Air Otter circles above us to land on the gravel strip next to Camp 222. Incoming provisions are unloaded and replaced with our packs. We say goodbye to our Dechen la’ hosts. One of our group, takes the co-pilots seat and reassures the pilot by getting out his map. We taxi to the western end of the airstrip and then we are off.

Keele Peak is clearly visible to our north-east, while Mt Fred Andrew lies to the south of us. We sit side-on, facing each other across the fuselage, with our baggage stowed in the rear. The noise of the engines drowns all speech. We are quiet, lost in our thoughts and, no doubt, reflecting on our shared adventure while wondering what lies ahead in our respective ‘journeys of life’. All too soon, the roofs of Whitehorse come into view. On the ground, it is time to say goodbye to some of the group who are flying on to Vancouver and the US Eastern Seaboard later that afternoon. Meanwhile, the Alkan Air minivan deposits us at our respective hotels.

That evening, the remnant of our group assembles at the Klondike Restaurant, one of the few restaurants in Downtown Whitehorse. Chowder, arctic char, bison, ‘bumbleberry pie’ and other delights supply a fitting end to our adventure. As we reflect, Robert Service’s poem ‘The Spell of the Yukon’ comes to mind:

No! There's the land. (Have you seen it?)

It's the cussedest land that I know,

From the big, dizzy mountains that screen it

To the deep, deathlike valleys below.

Some say God was tired when He made it;

Some say it's a fine land to shun;

Maybe; but there's some as would trade it

For no land on earth -- and I'm one.

The Earthwatch 'Climate Change at the Arctic's Edge' expedition runs for 11 days. You can join the team in the Mackenzie Mountains in July or in Churchill, Manitoba in February, June, July or October 2008. There is also a special team for 16 and 17 year olds in August. The expedition costs £1395 in Churchill and £3195 to join the remote expedition to the Mackenzie Mountains. This includes accommodation, training, food, medical emergency evacuation, travel while on the expedition and the offsetting of greenhouse gas emissions. It does not include international flights.

Earthwatch is launching 13 new expeditions in 2008.

Web page for the expedition http://www.earthwatchexpeditions.org/Europe/exped/kershaw_Churchill.html

Web links:

Canol Heritage Trail http://www.iti.gov.nt.ca/parks/parks_a_e/canol_trail_park.htm

Dechen La' www.dechenla.com

Taiga <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiga>

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