Southern Yukon alpine ice patches: climate change records, caribou history, ancient hunters and much more

Diane Strand

Dianne Strand, a guest speaker from the Southwest Yukon and member of the Crow Clan of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, spoke on the Southern Yukon Ice Patch Research: 'Linking Science with Community'.

The ice patches are yielding quantities of caribou dung, animal remains and hunting artifacts spanning the last 8000 years. These frozen sites, which represent a new and unique type of archaeological and palaeoecological site, are providing insights into environmental shifts, caribou history and biology and ancient and more recent precontact aboriginal hunting practices. The information forthcoming on the latter complements local oral history and ethnographic sources concerning hunting practices of the region's Southern Tutchone and Tagish peoples in precontact times, and highlights the importance of caribou hunting in the local economy. Through the ice patch research, a better understanding of regional aboriginal land use patterns is emerging.

The artifacts recovered from the ice patches range in age from 90 to nearly 7000 years BP and, owing to their excellent state of preservation, many of the specimens are unique in Canadian archaeology, as well as scientifically significant. Elements of both bow and arrow and atlatl/throwing-board hunting technology are represented in the collections.

A week-long Science Camp for teenagers has also been operated by the First Nations as an outreach component of the ice patch project. The ice patch studies are providing many opportunities for community education and development - a chance for First Nation citizens, especially youth, to be involved.

Figure 1 Diane Strand at the Jindabyne Conference. (C. Grant)

The accidental discovery in 1997 of large concentrations of ancient caribou dung and other organic remains melting from permanent alpine snow/ice patches in the southern Yukon has initiated a variety of multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural research efforts involving Government, University, and First Nations researchers and managers. The known patches are located within the traditional territories of four First Nations; Champagne and Aishihik, Carcross-Tagish, Kluane and Kwanlin Dün. The First Nations are involved in the management of the multi-disciplinary ice patch project, working jointly with government resource managers as well as collaborating university researchers. Citizens of the four First Nations participate in the field work, searching the ice patches for artifacts and biological specimens and surveying for related features such as hunting blinds, and interviewing Elders about their people's history with caribou.

Figure 2 Caribou in the Yukon. (D. Strand)
Figure 3 Early tool recovered from one of the melting ice patches. (D. Strand)

In the study of their history, and to link science and archaeology with community. Highlight of the Science Camp week includes a visit to a nearby ice patch where participants and visiting Elders see the ancient caribou dung and help search for artifacts; and the making and throwing of atlatls, one of the ancient tool forms being recovered from these unique archaeological sites. Looking ahead, it is anticipated that the ice patches are the 'gifts from the past' and that what they are yielding will provide many opportunities for community education and development.

Figure 4 Early hat recovered from melting ice patches. (D. Strand)

The issues concerning another kind of frozen site find, ancient human remains, however, are somewhat more complicated. This is the Kwaday Dan Ts'inchí, ('long-ago person' in the Southern Tutchone language) discovery that was made on a glacier in northern British Columbia in 1999. A management agreement that was in place prior to this find ensured that the First Nation in whose traditional territory the find was made was the lead agency in determining fate of the 'long ago person'. As the world and the media flocked to its door, eager for news, Champagne and Aishihik, suddenly thrust into a leadership position, guided the process.

Although not always sure of the correct course of action, throughout the entire matter, the First Nations' goals have been to ensure that the 'long ago person' be treated with the dignity and respect, that First Nations' objectives and values be respected and honored, and lastly to learn something about the 'long ago person' and his people. Despite these stated good intentions, for a variety of reasons dealing with Kwaday Dan Ts'inchí has been difficult for the First Nation, yet there have been positive benefits, including increased community dialogue and members awareness of their values. Some closure occurred in the summer of 2001 when the cremated physical remains of the 'long ago person' were returned to the area where he lost his life. Champagne and Aishihik is grateful for the support it has received on the matter, especially from neighbouring Tribes and First Nations.

Education of the people is a goal that the First Nation is striving for. To spark interest in the younger generation in the scientific field would benefit all, as these students are our future stewards of the land. To help the older generation gain some understanding of the science involved and how important their knowledge is to the projects dissipates the fear the community may have. This holistic approach of linking science with community is an advantage that we can not afford to lose.

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