'The Land That Never Melts' Is No More

Cumberland Sounds' Ice Conditions Worst in History

By ELIZABETH ANDRE

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Elizabeth Andre is a member of the Global Warming 101 expedition currently on a four-month trip around the most remote, inhabited regions of the Arctic. This expedition to investigate the impact of global warming has been hampered by the very conditions it set out to document. This is an update on the trip as told to ABC NEWS.com.

Days after our small team crossed an Arctic ice field, the surface broke up and disappeared. If we had set out hours earlier, team members may not have survived.

Canadian radio is reporting that the ice fields here are so thin that seal pups are falling through to their deaths. According to a CBC radio report, the area around Cumberland Sound is experiencing the worst ice conditions in recorded history, and we fear for our safety. This remote Inuit region is the frontline of Earth's changing climate.

Led by renown explorer Will Steger, our group has joined four Inuit hunters on a 1,200-mile, four-month-long dog-sled expedition across the Canadian Arctic's Baffin Island.

We are traveling with four Inuit dog teams over traditional hunting paths, up frozen rivers, through steep-sided fiords, over glaciers and ice caps and across the sea ice to reach some of the most remote Inuit villages in the world.

The team arrived in Pangnirtung March 10 after skirting around the edge of the Cumberland Sound. The base camp team was relieved to see the others mushing down the Pangnirtung fiord, after hearing the reports of thin ice and large stretches of open water on the sound.

The base camp team had flown to Iqaluit a few days before the dog teams arrived. On the plane, team member Elizabeth Andre sat next to Inuit elder Jamesie Mike. Jamesie lives in Pangnirtung but had traveled to Iqaluit for an elders meeting on climate change. Although Jamesie speaks only the native language here, Inuktitut, he can still communicate to Elizabeth about the ice conditions on Cumberland Sound.

Jamesie had the window seat on the side of the plane facing toward the head of the sound around which the dog teams were traveling. He tapped Elizabeth on the shoulder, with wide eyes fixed toward the window.

The view was frightening, since the ice on Cumberland Sound was fragmented with large stretches of completely open water. The northwest wind had blown the pack ice out toward the mouth of the sound, leaving miles and miles of open water near its head, right where the dog teams were traveling. The only
solid ice skirted the very edges of the sound, and even this was punctuated by occasional polynias (ice-free areas of warm upwelling ocean currents).

Jamesie turned to talk with another elder in the seat behind him. They both talked excitedly in hushed tones, pointing out the window toward the broken ice. The Inuit pulled his camera out of his bag and took several photos of the sound. He then removed from his bag two 8-inch-by-10-inch photocopies of satellite images of Cumberland Sound. One photo was taken Jan. 28, 2007, and the other on Feb. 16, 2007. On each photo Jamesie had written "Pang" in blue pen to mark the location of his home.

He swept his hand over the satellite image, motioning to Elizabeth that the ice that had been in the sound had all blown out to sea. Even though they could not communicate with words, they both understood the implications of the ice conditions.

For the local people who live and hunt around Cumberland Sound, the poor ice conditions mean dangerous or impossible travel between outpost camps and an inability to fish and hunt for subsistence. For visitors like the Global Warming 101 expedition, such conditions can prevent all attempts at travel in the region.

**Latest Update**

The Global Warming 101 expedition team is currently mushing through Auyuittuq National Park on its way to Qikiqtarjuaq. The route climbs over Akshayuk Pass, where numerous glaciers have carved the route down from the Penny Ice Cap and surrounding peaks.

Ironically, the name of this park translates as "the land that never melts," but the glaciers are now receding rapidly. Fifty years ago, the Fork Beard glacier, which the expedition team will pass on its way through the park, reached all the way to the valley floor. It has now receded more than 1,000 vertical feet and is no longer even visible from the valley floor.

The University of Ontario's geology department and Parks Canada have provided the team with images of the Beard Fork glacier over the past 50 years. They hope the team will document the current size of the Fork Beard glacier once it reaches the site.

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