RCGS Expedition Report – New Land 2013 Ellesmere Island Expedition

By Tobias Thorleifsson

Objectives

To travel through one of the most remote and beautiful regions in the Arctic while filming and documenting the journey; to celebrate the expedition of Otto Sverdrup; and to advocate for climate change education.

The Team

Tobias (Toby) Thorleifsson, John Huston, Kyle O’Donoghue, Hugh Dale-Harris, and four Canadian Inuit dogs (Elle, Axel, Larry, and Napu)

Expedition beginnings

Tobias (Toby) Thorleifsson noticed one day that areas in the Canadian High Arctic were littered with Norwegian place names – Axel Heiberg Island, Trold Fiord, Nansen Sound, etc. Toby soon dug into the historical documents of the 2nd Fram Expedition led by Norwegian Otto Sverdrup. (Fram comes from the name of their ship The Fram.) Between 1898 and 1902 Sverdrup and his 17-man team mapped nearly 150,000 square kilometres of what was to him “new land,” now known as the Ellesmere Island region. Along the way, they left a trail of Norwegian place names.

On March 31, 2013, a chartered De Havilland Twin Otter unceremoniously deposited us into Goose Fiord. After experiencing unseasonably warm temperatures in Iqaluit and Resolute, the howling wind and chilly conditions in Goose Fiord were a shock to the system. The winds also quickly brought home the reality that the men of the 2nd Fram expedition endured during their time in Goose Fiord. On a cold walk up the base of the cliffs, we were excited to come across what appeared to be a cartographic cairn that was used by Sverdrup’s expedition.

With Sverdrup’s book (New Land, 4 Years in the Arctic Regions) and his personal journal as our guides, we traveled north overland and along the western coast of Ellesmere Island. Portions of our route matched Sverdrup’s historic route to the same calendar day. Across Norwegian Bay, Sverdrup dog sledded over primarily rough multi-year sea ice. On Norwegian Bay we encountered only first year sea ice and didn’t see any multi-year ice until over 200 miles further north.

Like Sverdrup, we were engaged in route finding, wildlife sightings, changing vistas, and the feeling of venturing into the unknown. After reaching Bauman Fiord (named for Sverdrup’s second in command) and entering one of Ellesmere’s microclimates, wildlife encounters became commonplace for us. Every time we spotted a herd of musk oxen, we caught sight of Arctic wolves in the same vicinity. In total, we saw over 95 musk oxen and 60 wolves.

At several points, wolves trailed our team through the hills as we traveled during the day and came close to us when we set up camp. In addition to their pulling power, we had brought sled dogs in hopes that they would act as wildlife alarms. For the most part, however, our dogs reacted to the wolves with disinterest, whimpers, or soft barks.

We only saw two polar bears, both at a distance of 200 yards or further. The bears appeared curious, but in the end, were happy with continuing on their way in search of seals.

Our sled dogs pulled so effectively that they kept us ahead of schedule. So we decided to leave our ski sails in our resupply at the Eureka weather station. The dogs also provided a constant source of entertainment. They loved the challenge of the expedition as much as we did. The positive effects of canine companionship on Arctic expeditions cannot be overstated.
We were blessed with fantastic ski conditions for most of the 65-day expedition. The combination of flat first year sea ice, high-pressure weather, hard packed snow, and the eager power of our dogs made skijoring a true joy. We also felt the pace of skijoring fit in perfectly with the natural pace of the region and our goals. With a quarter of the dogs we would have needed for a full sled dog team, and much less gear and dog food, we all fit into one Twin Otter, which cut our air charter expenses in half.

The locations of two of Sverdrup’s cairns from the 2nd Fram Expedition have never been confirmed. The cairn Sverdrup built at Lands Lokk, the northernmost point of his dogsled journey, is significant as it connects Sverdrup’s mapping work with mapping from other expeditions from the early 20th century of Ellesmere Island.

In planning the expedition, we thought it would be interesting to search for the cairn exclusively, using resources from Sverdrup’s expedition, even though we realized the chances of locating it were slim. Lands Lokk sits at the northwestern edge of Ellesmere Island on the coast of the Arctic Ocean. After two days of searching, we found a cairn that matched the coordinates Sverdrup recorded in his journal. But we found nothing tangible in the cairn that could confirm that it was Sverdrup’s. Later, we were told that in 1906 American explorer Robert Peary left a note in the cairn, and in 1930, German Hans Krueger found Peary’s note and copied it onto his own note. British geologists Geoffrey Hattersley-Smith and Robert Christie found it in the 1950s. Ultimately, the location of Sverdrup’s Land Lokk cairn could not be confirmed and remains a mystery.

As time went on, our expedition followed the winter-to-spring transition. The first few days of the trip had temperatures of –35 C. In the middle portion of the trip, we had many days where temperatures were around -20 or -10 C. On the way south from Lands Lokk, we switched to traveling at night in the 24-hour sunlight. Daytime temperatures had become too warm for both the dogs and us. In order to escape the heat of the daytime sun, we would often camp in the shade on the northern side of the largest iceberg we could find, even if it meant going a little bit out of our way. Skiing south with the midnight sun behind us gave us some of the most stunning scenery of the trip as we made our way along the east coast of Axel Heiberg Island.

That soft brilliant midnight sun encapsulated the special experience of traveling in the Ellesmere Island region. It felt like we were in a land that time forgot, where nature’s ongoing epic of predators, prey, and plants plays out in a closely intertwined ecosystem. It was a place that we felt fortunate to be able to document and travel through by ski and dog.

**Educational outreach**

New Land 2013 is in the process of developing a package of 10 classroom activities that teachers can easily plug into school schedules and relate to curriculum at different grade levels.

The project is looking to partner with RCGS educational initiatives throughout Canada. The package of activities will be aimed at Canadian curriculum, i.e. Ontario Grade 6 Heritage & Citizenship Strand for Social Studies, Grade 6: First Nation Peoples & European Explorers.

The project has also partnered with the Will Steger Foundation and Chicago Voyagers to distribute its story, blog, classroom activities, and Arctic and climate curriculums to thousands of youth. John has toured many educational institutions. More educational partnerships are being pursued.

As well, the project has a comprehensive agreement with the Norwegian Ministry of the Environment. Before and after the expedition, Tobias spoke at 40 schools in Norway about New Land 2013 and climate change. The Ministry’s Generation Green campaign carried the expedition blog on several media platforms and provided guided interaction using educators dedicated to the project.
The expedition has also been covered by national media outlets. The Norwegian version of the documentary aired on Norway’s TV2 on December 30, 2013. Discussions about the distribution of the film in Canada and the United States are underway.