

In Search of Environmental Messengers

by Leslie Buchanan

They say in the Arctic there is a woman behind every tree; this of course is the case, as long as you bring along your own tree. The old saying did not hold true at the Eureka Weather Station between April 22 and May 9 however, as 22 male and female secondary school students from 15 countries, brought not trees, but the goal of gaining awareness about the Arctic environment.

The project fell under the umbrella of Icewalk, an organization that also encompassed an expedition of eight men from eight countries who, lead by British explorer Robert Swan, walked from Cape Aldrich to the North Pole. The goal of both projects was to generate global awareness of pollution in the arctic. The students were seen as appropriate environmental ambassadors since they are members of the new generation that will inherit the earth. It was hoped that the students would take this environmental consciousness home to their various countries.

Environment Canada saw the opportunity and AES took the lead, in educating these students through hands-on experiments and through lectures by scientists specializing in pollution relating to the Arctic. Neil Trivett and Lewis Poulin of AES, Ian Stirling (Canadian Wildlife Service), Bill Thorpe, Kavavow Kiguktak and David Akeagok (Canadian Parks Service) and Denis Gregor (Inland Waters Directorate) all volunteered their time to be part of the project.

As a member of AES Communications Directorate in Downsview, my job was to bring along the journalists, and cajole, beg and prod them into doing stories with an Environment Canada slant. In doing so, I learned not only about the Arctic Environment but of the metamorphosis of the people becoming acquainted with it.

In the beginning it was difficult to detect if the students chosen were the appropriate so-called spreaders of the word. Their personalities were all so different. Only time would tell.

My first encounter with Peter Hobart, one of the two Canadian students, was at the lunch held in Ottawa by the Minister, in honour of the students. His slicked back hair, dapper suit and motorcycle boots hardly seemed like the likely attire for a budding environmentalist. He tends bar in Georgetown on the weekends.

The students were as different as the countries from which they originated. Makoto from Japan was caught videotaping his teddy bear, while Michael from England loudly entertained anyone who would listen. Shailendra had difficulty learning how to clean the bathroom, something he had servants to do back home in India. And, while Emir and Irina from the Soviet Union were wrapped up in each other, Kenya's Stanley just smiled and shivered a lot.

The role of the escorts was vital in ensuring the students' mental and physical well being. Mr. Shiraishi of Japan provided more than one humorous moment while at the same time seeing that the environmental message was brought home. When handed a brochure or information packet, he would sit quietly by himself, read it and underline all the words he



Students from 15 countries wave enthusiastically from the snows of Eureka, N.W.T. as they begin their challenging two-week Icewalk Program.

didn't understand. He then accosted someone like myself to explain. It was quite an exercise, but worthwhile, when I saw that he was taking his students aside nightly, and reviewing the day's lessons.

Mr. Shiraishi was the one, who when standing in front of the Eureka weather station pondering the various identifying signs asked the meaning of "Customs and Exercise". He also raised a few eyebrows during our six-hour wait in the Resolute airport, (which incidentally was described by one of the journalists as purgatory) by playing Christmas carols on his ghetto blaster. When asked why, he said the snow made him feel like Christmas. When you think about it, if you're going to spend time in purgatory, you may as well do it with feelings of Christmas.

Instead of being on the outside looking in, the journalists who came to Eureka made a different type of contribution; an innovative perspective. For this, brazen CTV cameraman Peter Warren was famous. He always had his camera in front of a moving plane, or documenting the candid faces of the students.

Peter's partner, Parliament Hill correspondent Richard Gizbert, made friends with not only everyone involved with the Icewalk expedition, but also with the Japanese expedition camped nearby, the hot air balloonists, the people playing golf at the north pole and oh yes, there was the cabbie. When told by our taxi driver in Iqaluit that the suicide rate was extremely high, Peter asked the obvious question. In case you are wondering the answer, the preferred method is hanging. Richard's efforts were all made in an attempt to understand the people of the north.

The British film crew kept the escorts and journalists entertained after the students went to bed. The warehouse where they stored their camera equipment was the base for the evening gatherings. Smuggled scotch and an Australian guitar bridged the international gap on more than one occasion.

As the two week stay in Eureka progressed, the students interests in the Environment evolved. I had to laugh when during Bill Thorp's talk about the caves at Nahanni National Park, Bill paused, and tried to recall the difference between a stalagmite and a stalactite. Two students jumped up and got into a heated discussion about which one forms from the bottom and which forms from the top. I saw this as the first indication that the students were starting to become emotional about what they were learning.

The group was intrigued by the ozone sonde launched by Neil and Lewis. The questions were well poised and the interest was genuine. I know the interest was genuine, because I can assure you, it's too difficult to fake interest at those temperatures.

The interest translated into action as the students loaded abandoned oil drums on the plane that dropped them off at Lake Hazen for their Canadian Parks Service sponsored visit to Ellesmere Island National Park Reserve. The removal of the barrels is part of a plan to clean up the Arctic to which the Minister is committed.

I left Eureka with the journalists and most of the scientists after one week. I felt confident that the goal of increasing awareness was well on its way to being achieved. Updates from Eureka assured me that serious but sometimes emotional discussion of issues was taking place.

In retrospect I see there was definitely no lack of enthusiasm within the energetic bunch of students. As a matter of fact there wasn't really anything at all missing at the AES Weather Station in Eureka. The cooks Edna and Joe kept us well fed, and the staff gave their time, their bathrooms, kitchen, recreational facilities and vices, without complaint. The only serious lack I could identify was the lack of women. I thought maybe installing new trees might help!

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