

## Raison d'Être

Sometimes, amidst the rush and complexity of what passes for academic life in the last years of the first millennium, we miss the opportunity to reflect quietly on the reasons why we do what we do. This commentary is being written in the boardroom/poster room of the Arctic Institute's Kluane Lake Research Station in the Yukon. All around me on the walls are poster displays on such topics as the University of Ottawa Field School Program from 1975 to 1998, How Do Glaciers Surge?, Vertebrate Community Dynamics in the Yukon Boreal Forest, and the Mount Logan Ice Core Climatic Change Project. These displays focus on past and current projects at the research station, and are pinned up to explain to this season's field school students, graduate student researchers, and the occasional inquisitive tourist just what the Arctic Institute does in its 37th year of logistical support to Yukon science.

Outside my writing room another class of field scholars has arrived. They are bustling about unloading their gear, clad in brand-new Mountain Equipment Co-op vests, shirts, pants, and boots. Excitement is high as they look across the lake at Mount Wallace and the Slims River delta, and contemplate getting out into what lies beyond: the icefield ranges and the magic of the Donjek, Kluane, Kaskawulsh, Hubbard, and Lowell glaciers. Somewhere out there also lies the dominant form of Mount Logan, heavily sheathed in snow and ice, and temporarily capped with a sprinkle of German and Austrian climbers.

Earlier this morning, when I met with my colleagues on the Kluane Lake Research Station Users' Committee, we talked of our obligation to submit a Major Facilities Access Grant application to NSERC by October 1 to ensure that all of this tradition, science, and exuberant discovery can continue. Amidst a general air of good-humoured collaboration, social, biological, and physical scientists reviewed their progress over the past year and talked of their research dreams for the future. While the words conveyed strong commitment and rigor in the cause, the faces shone with the excitement of another good field season, renewed Yukon friendships, and the joy of sharing learning in one of the most beautiful places on earth.

At last night's group dinner in the mess hall, three generations of Kluane researchers shared lake trout, homemade soup, and local potatoes as they sat side by side, discipline by discipline, women and men, professors with students, and talked of their work. Free from the September-to-April urban tyranny of the classroom, professors shared their love of knowledge freely, joined in the raucous laughter of the moment, and demonstrated the human side of science. How can there be a better way to master a discipline than this?

Behind the kitchen counter, still laden with desserts and potential second helpings of trout, I spied my 16-year-old son Lance washing dishes as a summer volunteer. In the past month, he has learned a great deal more about an institute he has known until now only as a University of Calgary phenomenon. In the process, he has joined the scores of sons and daughters of Kluane researchers and Arctic Institute staff who have learned the ropes from the kitchen sink up. Yesterday he told me that Andy Williams, the base manager, had taken him up in his Helio-Courier airplane to see the Icefield Ranges from 10,000 feet, and that it had been "one of the best things I've ever done in my life." The tone of his voice and the shine in his eyes told me instantly that he too has been hooked.

Tonight he and I begin the trip back to Calgary, accompanied by duffle bags of worn-out clothing, dusty briefcases, and assorted field notes and draft grant applications. As we cruise down the Alaska Highway back to the land of e-mail, appointment books, and commercial pleasures, we'll both know one thing: we'll be back.

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