

Up North with the "Frozen Chosen"

by Dennis Stossel

Dennis Stossel Arctic superintendent for AES Central Region, raises many questions about the problems of adjusting to prolonged northern isolation and of becoming part of the sometimes stifling "microculture" of an Arctic station. Despite 20 years personal experience working in the north and at least four visits a year in his present position, he does not pretend to know all the answers. Instead he suggests an in-depth sociological survey on the problems of AES personnel in the north be carried out by Health and Welfare Canada or by an independent university team.

A woman getting up at 4 a.m. in dazzling sunshine, donning heavy pants and a parka, walking from her "integrated" living quarters to her work at a computerized upper air station, seeing as she goes a frozen landscape, dotted with Arctic poppies, or occasionally visited by snowy owls and musk-oxen.

The scene symbolizes the new technology and changing life styles of the Arctic, with even a hint that the tundra setting itself may soon vanish under headlong rush of "civilization".

AES priorities stress a wide range of weather services to the public including efficient operation of its aerological and other Arctic observing stations (not forgetting improved monitoring of precipitation and pollutants). Equally important, however, among Environment Canada's concerns are the tremendous human resource problems of the North.

Some of the new scientific programs require enclaves of men and women to work together in conditions of prolonged social isolation in a frozen, monochromatic and alien environment.

Contrary to the popular image of lonely living conditions and "heroic" tasks, our Arctic employees today have to cope with the very opposite of loneliness, while tasks can be dull and routine.

Workloads and scientific programs vary considerably from posting to posting... a meteorologically-oriented task at say Resolute Bay versus extensive station-

The picture shows meteorological instruments in front of the AES weather station at Clyde, N.W.T.



support duties at Eureka. The latter could include such tasks as housekeeping, janitorial and washroom detail, loading of aircraft, or safety patrol of the camp area.

Supervisors too have varying responsibilities. At some stations they are required to oversee the work of a single person, at others more than a dozen. At some postings they are all AES personnel, at others they come from two or more federal departments, say Environment Canada and Transport Canada or Energy, Mines and Resources. Some supervisors also hire personnel under contract, for example cooks, handypersons or heavy equipment handlers.

Isolation and technology

During the past decade or so communications technology has come to the North in a big way, so have material comforts. Nowadays it is nothing to find telephones and telecopiers hooked up to satellites, automatic weather stations, ADRES mini-computers, indoor plumbing, fresh water piped in from deep water lakes, saltwater desalination units, VTR systems, saunas, frequent air service to populated centres, with mail and groceries delivered regularly.

Despite these improvements, social isolation remains a major psychological problem in the North. Each person must adapt to a tight, closed-in world of interpersonal relations. A typical Arctic posting with a private company might last 4-5 months followed by 2-3 weeks leave, then

possible transfer to a slightly less remote location. Adopting this pattern, some trades personnel have spent many years in the North while maintaining a home in the South. On the DEWLINE for instance some of the original 1955 personnel are still working there.

AES "longevity" in the Arctic has not been nearly as successful. A 5-6 month stay followed by 3-4 weeks vacation (or converted overtime) is encouraged. It is rare, however, for aerological observers to serve a full 1 or 2 year term and this can cause staffing problems, especially for supervisory personnel.

Employment of indigenous people has assumed a much higher profile in the past few years especially in commercial ventures for various reasons. The AES experience with native people has been somewhat less successful.

Despite these comings and goings of Arctic workers, there is a fundamental need for them to adapt locally. But it is a highly complex problem involving interactions on the physical, physiological, psychological and sociological levels. Factors such as the long winter nights (the sun sets at Alert on October 14 and is not seen again until March 1) or the never darkening summers giving rise to "Arctic hysteria", play a major role.

Going into darkness in October and coming out of it in March creates the greatest stress. Addiction to television or video-tapes and less time given to personal

hobbies is a recent phenomenon possibly linked to this stress. The harsh climate tends to breed a stoic, uncommunicative individual trying perhaps to disguise any signs of weakness or dependency. This attitude has diminished of course with the introduction of telephones or other means of communication, and more frequent outside inspections. Improved transportation across the North has made alcohol more available and drinking to excess is a problem at many Arctic communities. A number of Inuit settlements have voted themselves dry. Alcoholism could become a problem at government enclaves too.

Changes in social behavior

Without going into detail, it can be affirmed that social relations at some isolated outposts have been in a state of flux since AES introduced women to stations like Eureka, Resolute, Mould Bay and Hall Beach, all during the past five or six years. (More recently the Canadian Armed Forces introduced women to their Alert base). Changes are noticeable at company enclaves with women fully participating in "non-standard roles" on drilling rigs (both land and offshore), at mining sites, and in construction camps. In other words they are no longer performing just stereotyped jobs like teacher, nurse, social worker and clerk. This past year at Mould Bay the senior aerological observer, the electronic technician, the seismologist and other technicians were all female.

How is the new generation of "Arctic heroes" coping? Are social relations a major problem? Can we still talk about moral correctness? Are there certain character traits that suit a man or woman to Arctic isolation? Do conditions vary as

between say Resolute and Coral Harbour or Alert and Mould Bay?

During my 20 years experience north of the Arctic Circle I did not find any stereotype of an Arctic person. Most stations still thrive on a structure of informal relations, with people's feelings towards one another adjusting automatically. Weather conditions do play an enormous part - a 3-day storm in total darkness is bound to affect people quite differently than several weeks of continuous sunshine. They are also influenced by the tone of messages received from Regional Headquarters or by the comings and goings of their cohorts. Management decisions are often based on impoverished information and irrational behavior tends to increase as winter sets in. For example there is an increase in the level of cynicism, with individuals stating what should or should not happen to "their" station, widening the communications gap still further.

Now that there is mail at Arctic weather stations every three weeks and the sites are accessed by satellite-telephone, alienation should be less of a problem. However, there are some patterns of internal conflict that are not noticed by Regional Management until they endanger station safety or welfare.

O I C at the centre

The person at the centre is the AES Officer-in-Charge. He or she is our catalyst, the individual who sets the tempo, takes into consideration feelings and attitudes, helps determine the level of morale and staff motivation, in other words forms a cohesive work unit. The morale problem is very relevant to each member's well being, in turn affecting his/her work performance and such key factors as

safety and relations with other station personnel.

In other words the quality of leadership in isolation is all-important... and it must be a personal style of leadership. The OIC must be both part of informal inter-staff relationships and must help motivate and direct general behaviour. As part of management he/she must promote an AES esprit de corps.

When it is realized that the cost of operating and maintaining Eureka alone is nearly \$3,000 a day, one need hardly doubt that guidelines seeking efficient and economical management take priority. The OIC wears a number of hats... airport manager, customs and immigration officer, postmaster, public relations person and guide for many visitors both private and government.

At the station, leadership is a two-way affair with the "team" helping the OIC and vice versa. Admittedly we have not yet found the ideal leader, but there are many people with the potential. The critical factor is the supervisor's ability to communicate with other members on site. He must be aware of the station's "micro-culture" and social systems that change with the seasons.

Is management providing enough training for AES supervisors to meet the challenge of successful leadership in the North? When we recruit, do we really make trainees understand the complexities of adapting to isolation? In practical terms we need to know whether the problem of alienation warrants investigation by Dept. of National Health and Welfare teams. Lastly, we should meet the challenge of successful adaptation to living and working in remote areas by designating the problem an AES priority in the five-year plan. □



Two female upper air technicians are seen conversing in front of their accommodation at Eureka (N.W.T.). They are Cheryl Leyton (left) and Heather McInnis. (Photo: John McBride)



An iceberg floats off Middle Bay, St. Lawrence North Shore. (Photo: Guy Belanger)