



# THE BIRDFISH

SPRING 2019

Churchill Northern Studies Centre  
Newsletter

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Cover Photo by Chloe Rodrigues, Fox Researcher

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# A Tribute to Dennis Macknak

By Richard Bello, Former CNSC Board Chair

**D**ennis Macknak, the second Executive Director of the Churchill Northern Studies Centre, had a profound impact on the development of the CNSC. His passing on December 28th, 2018 gives us pause to reflect on how his dedication, ingenuity and perseverance provided the foundation of what the Studies Centre has become today.

Dennis arrived in Churchill in 1985, while the Studies Centre was situated in its original home in Akudlik. It was a pivotal time in its evolution as new structural changes to the CNSC Board of Directors had just been implemented by the Province's Interdepartmental Committee consisting of the Departments of Natural Resources, Aboriginal Affairs and Education, from which the latter would assume the role as lead funding agency. One of their first acts was to hire Dennis, who was a sociologist by training, and past Director of the Winnipeg Education Centre and Associate Professor of Education, University of Manitoba. He had spent the prior several years as Executive Director of Winnipeg Core Area Training and Employment Agency, helping develop Winnipeg's inner-city employment programs. He arrived with research funding to evaluate the effectiveness of the Limestone training program plus \$42,000 destined for upgrading the Centre's sewage and water systems. Knowledge of the Centre's infamous composting toilets had apparently spread to the Province's Capital! And this was no small achievement considering our total annual operating budget was only slightly larger than \$300,000 at the time. Many will recall the angst that was felt when we learned that the Health Department was about to visit the Centre and almost certainly close down the kitchen because there were no fume hoods over the gas range. Dennis confidently replied that from his experience, *"This should be exactly what we need to leverage additional funding to upgrade the kitchen facilities. Calm down."*

Shortly thereafter, the federal government announced their intention to close the Churchill Research Range (Rocket Range). This setback to the community followed earlier shocks which saw the diversion of the Churchill River for hydroelectric production which resulted in substantial reductions to water flow with incalculable repercussions for the environment and disruptions to local commerce and recreation. This was closely followed by the closing of the military base at Fort Churchill, reducing Churchill's population to less than a fifth of its former size. This formed the backdrop of the opportunity for the CNSC to relocate to *Launch*. But, perhaps, only in a temporary caretaker role?

The monumental determination to pull up stakes and move was ultimately the decision of Dennis Macknak. On one hand, the researchers loved Akudlik given its proximity to their research sites in Akudlik Marsh, Goose Creek, Mile 4 and Beach Bay with the added convenience of accessing services in town. There were even entreaties from town that perhaps the abandoned Harbours Board building at Cape Merry would provide a more suitable location. On the other hand, there was the lure of the tremendous potential for growth that *Launch* represented; infinitely larger laboratory facilities, a workshop, vehicles could be serviced indoors in a garage (that had a hoist!), let alone that guests could now use flush toilets. Two final pieces to the puzzle were first, the release of the \$42,000 to go towards constructing sleeping facilities at *Launch*, as none existed because traditionally, personnel ferried back and forth from town daily. The second was the lease arrangement Dennis negotiated with the National Research Council to pay for office space for three personnel retained to decommission the Rocket Range over the ensuing years, which would help offset anticipated increases in utility costs.

Shortly after the final rocket was launched and the gate controlling access to *Launch* was raised, volunteers began transporting truckloads of equipment and furniture down the coast to our new home. That summer, all bunk beds from Akudlik were relocated to the *Telemetry* room to form a single, communal sleeping quarters for guests. Over the following summer, temporary plywood-partitioned bedrooms were being constructed in a wing of the building previously used as a storage garage; all in time for the polar bear season. Meanwhile, three of the Panabode cabins from Akudlik inched their way down the road to finally rest on the existing concrete foundations next to the *Weather Building*. Other Panabodes were sold to prospective cottagers while two made it to town; Becket Hall, the lab building in Akudlik, became the NWT Government Transient Centre and the CNSC's main administration building became Churchill Home Hardware.

Dennis then applied for a *Manitoba Community Places* grant to build a formal dormitory, subsequently named in honour of Bishop Omar Robidoux. *The Bishop* was the CNSC's inaugural Board Chair who died in a tragic plane accident along with two other prominent Churchill residents, Keith Rawlings and then CNSC Chair, Jack O'Connor. Dennis, committed to developing

local employment opportunities, offered the task of building Robidoux Hall to local tradesman, Mike Reimer, in what would be his first major construction contract, rather than invite bids from elsewhere in the province. We were rewarded with a marvelous modern dormitory facility that withstood the test of time. Though, as numerous guests remarked over the years, *"...but there are no locks on the bedroom doors"*.

Oddly enough, this was Dennis's way of trying to encourage a sense of

community, in the same way that leaving your camera on the dining room table engendered a sense of security amongst a community you could trust. That community was built through countless volunteer hours helping the cook, sharing recipes, washing dishes, lending time to paint, re-shelve books, repair the roof or the washing machine, by sharing research discoveries or simply by sharing experiences. This community included



Dennis Macknak (right) receiving an award from Don Unruh

Dennis's family; spouse, Sandy and their two daughters, Cali and Jesi.

The absence of door keys also had practical implications. As Dennis remarked years later, "There was also the issue of having someone at the front desk all the time, to replace keys that had been locked in a room." To be sure, in those early years there was barely enough money for one seasonal cook, two seasonal facilities/housekeeping staff, and one full-time office manager, Louise Foubert, who managed all the office responsibilities; rarely additional office staff. To many, Louise was the welcoming voice and face of the CNSC and personified the friendly in Friendly Manitoba. The dividend of having three NRC staff on site, ostensibly for decommissioning the Launch site, was that Lindy Lee, Danny De Muelles and Clifford Paddock served an indispensable role in providing expert advice on fleet and facilities and as mentors to the researchers for historical, logistical and local ecological knowledge.

With the change in Provincial Government during this period, came what many Manitobans will remember as, *Filmon Fridays*. For the CNSC, this change had near fatal consequences. A new Provincial government representative at the time had expressed displeasure at the inconvenience of having been appointed to the CNSC's board, but even then, it came as a shock when we received notice that this would be the final year for any Provincial base funding for the CNSC. There was no possibility of sustaining operations minus one-third of our operating budget. Dennis settled on a three-pronged appeal with the conviction, "So we're going to give them a million dollars of grief for a hundred-thousand dollars". This included encouraging every researcher who had ever used the CNSC to write a letter of concern to the Premier. The outpouring of support was humbling and included scores of scientists from every part of Canada, in addition to letters from colleagues in the U.S. and Europe, attesting to the pivotal role the CNSC was playing in Northern research and scholarship. It included the unwavering support of the Mayor of Churchill, Doug Webber and included a key missive from the University of Toronto's President, Robert Pritchard. The response from the community that had developed around the CNSC, resulted in a new Board representative being appointed by the Province, who served as an advocate for the CNSC for the next decade, and led to the restoration of base funding for which we continue to strive to be deserving recipients.

A comprehensive list of Dennis's contributions to the development of the CNSC could occupy many pages, but parts of his legacy are readily visible to guests even today; simple things like the design of the CNSC Polar Bear poster, *Arctic Education and Research*, still available in our gift shop. But also, more fundamental initiatives such as our first international scientific conference, *Circumpolar Ecosystems in Winter*, featuring an indigenous clothing fashion show at the Town Complex (in February!) curated by Jill Oakes, or creating the Churchill Northern Studies Centre's Northern Research Fund or laying the foundations for our long-standing role in Northern adult education through that first course with Elderhostel.

In an early 1990's *CBC Documentary* on Churchill, Dennis was asked how he might characterise this small community on Hudson Bay. He described it as a community of "dreamers". Of people who were visionaries, striving to make the community better and help achieve its potential. I know that Dennis Macknak can rightfully take his place in that community and we owe him and his family our deepest gratitude. ❁

# Rocket Greens Hydroponic Workshop

March 19-23, 2019

By Carley Basler, Sustainability Coordinator



The Churchill Northern Studies Centre (CNSC) Rocket Greens project has been a success since it began in early November 2017. As the project gathered momentum, we started to field calls from communities who were interested in starting similar projects in their own communities. We started to think it would be nice to get some people together to share our experiences with them.

We were generously awarded a Planning Grant from the Northern Manitoba Food Culture and Community Collaborative to host a workshop for some Manitoba Communities interested in getting started with hydroponics. The grant allowed us to provide travel funds and accommodations for participants from Norway House, Pukatawagan, Roseau River, Wasagamack and Winnipeg to attend a small workshop hosted here at the CNSC.

Daily discussions were held on topics like planning, planting, harvesting, maintenance, marketing, packaging of produce and common issues. Participants were also invited to take part in some hands on activities including transplanting of seedlings, mixing nutrient batches, filter maintenance and clean-up.

On the first night of the workshop, participants were invited to a cooking event in the community where they were able to cook and share a delicious meal with some folks from Churchill using Rocket Greens harvested from the CNSC's own Growcer Hydroponic Unit. It was a great way for our guests to meet some local people and to sample the locally grown leafy greens.

Participants also ventured out on the town for an evening at the Seaport Hotel, a quick day tour of the area for sight seeing, some shopping and some of the

participants even went dogsledding with a local musher.

It was a real pleasure to be able to share our experiences of containerized hydroponic growing with some very interesting people from a diverse range of communities in Manitoba. ❁



### *the space where things meet*

Churchill was an utterly fascinating experience. I was fortunate to be artist-in-residence at CNSC through the Manitoba Arts Council in late February and early March. I work in jewelry and metalsmithing, printmaking, writing and occasionally filmmaking. Across these diverse media I tend to explore similar themes: landscape, family history, memory (and its unreliability), evocation of that which no longer exists, our interconnected and sometimes complicated relationships with all we encounter. The opportunity to visit Churchill in order to gather research for new projects was very exciting. I'd always wanted to experience Churchill but travel, for me, is much more profound when I can work in a place or live with local people. I'm not one to lay on a beach or get drinks served to me poolside for days on end.

Churchill has a mystique that draws visitors from around the world. A place of intersecting ecosystems and extreme climate, of unique plants and animals, of resilient and captivating people. This reputation persists because it is in fact true. I learned so much, sometimes from the most casual comments or tiny observations that kept taking me back to the CNSC's lovely library or to the scientists, volunteers and staff, or outside in the cold clear air to discover more. The new project I was researching was still very preliminary in my mind but it was about exploring air - as a natural force where seeds disperse, birds migrate, aurora gather and as a cultural force where memories and stories are held.

Although the polar bears were denning (females) or far out on the ice hunting (males) I was advised not to wander too far outside. So for my first few days I spent a lot of time in the library that has a wonderful collection of scientific and other books either specific to Churchill or to the North. On the spine of *Wildflowers of Churchill* was written "Herbarium Copy." Hmm, a herbarium? I had recently participated in an artist workshop at the herbarium at the University of Manitoba. I loved the experience and created a series of jewelry sculptures that evoked the power of seeds. So I asked the scientists about the herbarium and for the next week they kindly opened the door to a room that doubled as storage so that I could access the plant specimens. I would carefully select a plant from each folder and draw it. Drawing is a great way to observe and to think. I produced a little sketchbook depicting plants collected in Churchill - ones that I could not see because it was winter. In a way the book is a memory of plants.

One Friday night many of the staff and volunteers were going to the Legion in town. Would I like to join? Yes, please. I loved



Photo featuring Tricia Wasney, taken by Caelen Beard, Aurora Season volunteer

being at CNSC, but had not yet seen the town and was spending a lot of time alone drawing and reading. I met incredibly open and friendly people, the most remarkable of whom was Greg, husband of Peggy, the baker at CNSC. Greg sat down and said "well my dear what is your name and what are you doing here?" When I said my name Greg's eyes lit up and he said "Wasney! Do you know the Wasneys from Garson?" That is where my father grew up and so did Greg. The next morning Peggy brought Greg's local history book of Garson to lend me and there were pictures of my dad, his mother, their farm, his siblings, all of them now gone. So in Churchill, where I least expected it, I was returned, teary-eyed, to my familiar exploration of family history.

There is so, so much more. I continue to ponder and delve into all that I experienced at the CNSC and in Churchill. The vast space of the tundra was humbling and the rocket range relics a kind of monument to human intervention in our quest for knowledge. The sunsets viewed from my room were glorious, perfect for wine o'clock. Orion and all the stars were stunning. The aurora was spectacular. I learned about spruce tree islands and the Krummholz effect from Owen and Steve, about snow science and "*Life in the Cold*" from LeeAnn, about infectious enthusiasm for Churchill from Beth and Evan, about wildlife biology from Alex, about the Aurora from Ron, about dogsledding and endurance from Dave, about science and wildlife painting from Tomas, about being adventurous, independent and creative from volunteers Bryan, Hélène, Mark, Ilana, Linda, and Caelan and travelers Lucy and Barbara, about how a well-kept house and warm food comfort and bring us together from Patsy, Sharon, Sara and Peggy, and about the beauty of curiosity and forging new paths from Elijah. I thank them all and to everyone in Churchill and the Manitoba Arts Council, I am forever grateful. ❄️



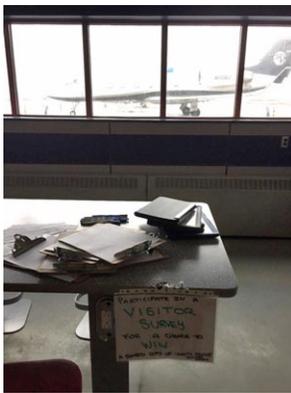
Tricia Wasney at Wapusk Dog Yard

# The Success of Passionate Research

By Jamie D'Souza

University of Ottawa / Jamie.dsouza@hotmail.com

**T**he best advice I can give someone who is looking to pursue a graduate degree is to find a topic/research project you are passionate about. My passion? Polar bears. When I began my master's degree at the University of Ottawa in the Department of Geography, Environment, and Geomatics, I knew that I wanted to do a project related to polar bears and climate change and that I wanted to see a bear in its natural environment. My project quickly took off and it was decided that I would focus on Churchill's polar bear viewing tourism industry. This study, originally conducted in 2007, allowed me to examine the relationship between climate change and tourism and to analyze changes in the industry.



During the 2018 polar bear viewing season, I had the amazing opportunity to travel to Churchill to conduct my research. While in Churchill, my job was to hand out surveys to tourists who had participated on a polar bear viewing tour during their current visit to Churchill. The surveys were used to help me identify an estimation of this industry's greenhouse gas emissions, tourists' motivation to travel, their knowledge about climate change and their opinions on strategies

to reduce emissions. My surveys were conducted at the Churchill Northern Studies Centre (a huge shout out to the staff and volunteers) and at the Churchill Airport (a huge thank you to the staff who had to deal with me 3 times a week, trying to get tourists to take part in the survey). My participants were excited to part of my research and the conversations we had following the survey were quite insightful. In all, I collected 513 completed surveys, and although it was a lot of work for my data analysis, the results from this survey provided me with some valuable and surprising information. Greenhouse gas emissions were the same as in 2007 (approximately 3-34 higher than an average tourism experience, depending on the departure country and city the respondent was traveling from). This is largely due to the dependence on air travel required to reach Churchill. However, now that the train is functioning again, maybe these numbers will go down. I know I will be taking the train next time I go to Churchill! Motivation to travel, well you may have guessed it, was to see a polar bear in its natural environment. Respondents were also interested in photography, seeing other Arctic animals and were hoping to see the northern lights (come back in March, I hear they are amazing!). Other interesting findings were that people's knowledge about climate change hasn't changed very much since 2007. Almost all my respondents said that

climate change was happening, but few people were convinced air travel was a contributor to these changes or that polar bears would disappear from the Churchill region as a result. My respondents believe that the best ways to address the problems of climate change are through educational programs and promotion of alternative modes of transportation (such as taking the train) and that everyone (tourists, tour operators, and policy makers) all play a role towards implementing change.

I'm very passionate about my project and very eager to share my experiences, research, and results. I've been fortunate to

**My research opens a lot of doors for future studies which could even expand past the polar bear viewing industry into other the tourism activities Churchill offers throughout the year. The possibilities are endless.**

have had many opportunities to do so within my department and my university. Almost immediately upon my return to Ottawa, I presented my results at the 2018 ArcticNet scientific meeting to scientists, students and organizations who do Arctic related work and even saw some familiar Churchill faces during this conference. During a seminar series, organized by my department, I had an hour to talk to students and professors, not only about my research, but about polar bears, the tourism industry, and interesting features that Churchill has to offer. We had a great discussion and the audience

had a ton of interesting questions. In March, I took on the challenge of participating in a 3-minute thesis competition. Condensing all of my interesting facts and findings into 180 seconds was difficult but it paid off as I qualified as a finalist in the regional portion of the competition. Furthermore, I presented my research at a conference organized by the university's graduate student association and at a symposium which highlights student's research in the North, organized by the University of Ottawa and Carleton University.

As you can tell, I love talking about my project and showing off my polar bear pictures.

Although, I am in the midst of writing my thesis and journal articles in order to obtain my degree, this research doesn't and shouldn't end with me. There is so much more work to be done! There is still so much to learn about tourists' travel habits, and how to encourage tour operators to start talking about the implications of travel. There's a lot more work to be done towards developing solutions and strategies and determining how to make people more aware about the implications of climate change. My research opens a lot of doors for future studies which could even expand past the polar bear viewing industry into other the tourism activities Churchill offers throughout the year. The possibilities are endless.

I am extremely grateful to have had this opportunity to do research in Churchill and I hope I can return one day to share my results with everyone there. I am also grateful I found my passion and that it has helped bring me to where I am now. It's been a challenging journey but so worth it and I can't wait to see what's next! ❄️



# Instructing at the CNSC

by Ron Waldron

*The feel of winter as you enter the CNSC site*



**T**he Churchill Northern Studies Centre is a great place to instruct visitors and guests about the wonder and magic of the northern lights. The facility itself is state of the art and is located well away from strong light sources 25 km away

from the town of Churchill. The view of the lights is unprecedented owing to Churchill's latitude (+58) which places visitors directly under the auroral oval. As an instructor, I never have to worry about the lights as they appear on average 300 of the 365 days in a year. Clouds are the only other concern but the CNSC's aurora season is chosen during the colder days of the year when skies tend to be clearest, so the chances of clear skies are higher than at other times of the year.

The guests we receive come with seeing the northern lights as their bucket list item. They are well travelled, well read, and lifelong learners. In a nutshell, they tend to be very interesting people. The class size is never larger than 23, a low and very manageable number that I achieved only once in my 36-year teaching career.

We offer evening interactive lectures on the aurora and astronomy four of the five days that the guests are here as they wait for the aurora which most often occurs after 9 PM. The

lectures include the cause and history of the aurora, the importance of dark adapting your eyes, and how to effectively photograph the lights. If the aurora appears prior to the end of a night's lecture, that evening's lecture is postponed, and everyone goes outside to view and photograph the lights.

The design of the building is such that there are several ways the guests can go. If they only wish to view the lights, there is a heated dome that can accommodate up to seven people giving a 360-degree view of the night sky. Those interested in photography are encouraged to go outside on the grounds around the outside of the building or on the L-Shaped deck which is constructed to face the north and east where the aurora usually begins.

The appearance of the aurora is constantly monitored via a rooftop webcam and various online sites that attempt to predict both the appearance and the strength of the aurora. The most notable is [spaceweather.com](http://spaceweather.com) as it provides live data and is constantly updated. Guests learn to become proficient at predicting the aurora themselves as they are introduced to a variety of apps to use on their mobile phones.

Finally, the staff at the Centre are equally passionate about the work that they are doing and are always eager to meet the guests and give them the experiences of living and learning in Canada's North. They are more than willing to assist and work with me as together we try to give all the guests lasting memories and quite often the experience of a lifetime.

In closing, I would like to add that any time I can teach to my passion, it is never a chore but rather a privilege. I look forward to this privilege every spring at the Churchill Northern Studies Centre in northern Manitoba, Canada. ❄️



The Rocket Range Blockhouse featuring the Sea Wall Churchill mural 'Impact' by Kai Kaulukukui with Aurora as back light. Photo by Chloe Rodrigues



Dawn breaking at the CNSC

## A New Face!

Hi, everyone, I'm Eric and the new Field Station Coordinator. I'm originally from Southern Ontario but have lived in many different regions and provinces throughout Canada. I graduated from the University of Waterloo with a B.A. in Sports Business and Tourism and have a remote tourism operations and logistics concentration. I have experience from working on fishing camps and in tourism oriented remote mountain settings. This is my second time calling Churchill and the CNSC home as in the fall of 2018 I was the administrative intern. I love sports and the outdoors and have a passion for fishing. I look forward to meeting everyone that comes through our doors here at the CNSC and I am excited to be back in Churchill. ❄️



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## to understand and sustain the north

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# thanks

to understand  
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the north



Have you made a Lasting Impact on northern research and education? If you are receiving this newsletter you have. All of you have created a lasting impact by donating directly, participating in a course, conducting research, instructing a

course, volunteering your time or by becoming a member of our organization. We would like to take this opportunity to thank you and let you know that you have made a difference. Every year we face new challenges but what remains consistent is your dedication to helping us continue our mission here in the north. **Thank You!**

How can you continue to make a Lasting Impact on the north? Tell everyone around you about your experience with us in Churchill. By becoming an ambassador for the Churchill Northern Studies Centre (CNSC) your impact on northern research and education will be limitless. You can recommend us as a destination for learners of all ages, school group trips, conferences and meetings, credit and non-credit university courses, a place to conduct research from any discipline and as a charity worthy of support of any amount. **Thank you for all you do for us!**

In honour of Dennis Macknak, we are starting a scholarship fund to annually award a local youth pursuing science and/or education. If you want to help us jump-start this fund, please choose to donate to the Birdfish Fund and make a note that you support the scholarship!

# contribute

Your contribution is still needed to ensure that WE meet all the expectations that YOU, our participants, researchers, educators, donors and members have for the future of the CNSC. No contribution is too small. Every gift counts.

## How to contribute:

Visit our website [www.churchillscience.ca](http://www.churchillscience.ca) – click the "Donate" button to donate securely through our partner Canada Helps.

Visit our Canada Helps Giving Page – <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/churchill-northern-studies-centre/>

Contact Kim at **204 675 2307** or [daley@churchillscience.ca](mailto:daley@churchillscience.ca) – and she will process your donation personally.

Clip the form below and mail to **CNSC, Box 610, Churchill, MB, ROB 0E0, Canada**

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the Churchill Northern Studies Centre Today!

We rely on our membership to provide the support and funding needed to make the CNSC a place for world class research and education programs in the Canadian subarctic. Join us now and be part of these exciting times at the CNSC. Already a member? Use this form to ensure your membership remains current. Renew or Join today!

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