

# The pandemic has strengthened collaboration between scientists and Inuit communities

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Matisse Harvey | May 14, 2021



*Assistant professor at the University of Alberta, Maya Bhatia will return to Grise Fiord in July, a year after being deprived of field work due to the health crisis.*

Scientists are preparing to head to Nunavut this summer to resume their field research. If the pandemic has hampered the work of many researchers over the past year, many agree that it has given a greater role or role to the communities of the territory.

Alex Flaherty is the founder of Polar Outfitting, an Iqaluit tour company that offers hunting and fishing trips, among other things.

Since graduating from the Environmental Technology Program at the Nunavut Arctic College in 2008, he has been regularly called upon by scientists in Canada and abroad to support them in their work in the field.

It means a lot to us Inuit to be able to conduct research on behalf of scientists , he says.

Since the health restrictions in effect in Nunavut during the summer of 2020 did not allow scientists to enter the territory, Alex Flaherty has been particularly busy during the past year.

He is working with the research network Ocean Networks Canada (ONC), University of Victoria, British Columbia, and the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans to study the impact of the construction of the deepwater port of Iqaluit on the environment.

We put our knowledge and expertise to good use while following virtual trainings and videoconferences to learn how to use this type of equipment before sending the data [to the scientists] , he says, the day after a day. sampling carried out with his son.

## Back in the field

Unlike last summer, the Government of Nunavut this year allows scientists from outside Nunavut to enter the territory for research, on condition that they self-isolate for 14 days in a quarantine center. from the south of the country.

Maya Bhatia is Assistant Professor in the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Alberta. We joined her in Edmonton, which she will be leaving in a few weeks for Nunavut. At the end of the line, she struggles to hide her impatience to get a taste of fieldwork again.

As part of our research, we'll be heading to Jones Sound, where we'll look at areas that are ice-free and those that aren't , she sums up.

Along with five other scientists, she will continue a collaborative research project piloted since 2019 by the University of Ottawa, the University of Toronto and the University of Alberta.

We are mainly interested in the interaction between the ocean and glaciers , she continues. The team is studying the impact of melting ice on the marine ecosystem, in particular by measuring the nutrient content in the water.

## Aftermath of the pandemic

Researchers will have their work cut out for them to catch up over the past year. Maya Bhatia admits that the health crisis has had an immense impact on research in the North, due to the inability for scientists to continue their data collection in the field.

The contribution of French scientist Éric Brossier, who was in the community of Arctic Bay when the pandemic broke out in March 2020, however, helped the team to continue its work without interruption.

[My family and I were] were already there, so we got permission to navigate , he says. Joined in Ottawa, he is currently completing his mandatory quarantine before entering Nunavut.

He says he is lucky to have been able to continue documenting the changes taking place in the region. The Arctic is a very sensitive region, it is a real sentinel of the climate , he explains. From year to year, there are a lot of changes.

Since the start of the year, the Nunavut Research Institute (NRI) has granted 72 permits related to research in the social, environmental and health sciences.

A significant proportion of these will be done remotely , says IRN's director of research and policy development in an email exchange. He says the IRN usually grants 120 research permits per year.

## Trust

Maya Bhatia says the pandemic has made her team's ability to build a bond of trust with the Grise Fiord community more complex. To make a connection, you have to be present , she says. But it is difficult to be present when you cannot get there.

This summer, the team plans to work with Ausuittuq Adventures, a company that offers outdoor excursions around the community.

I think there is a growing tendency for scientists to turn to outdoor companies [...] and that makes perfect sense , argues the assistant professor.

She also believes that this increased collaboration allows experts to obtain continuous data throughout the year, rather than being limited to those collected on site during the summer season.

Usually scientists go to the field in the summer, so our data is very biased , she admits.

By widening the window of our database, we add significant value to our scientific research , assures Maya Bhatia.

Alex Flaherty believes this trend is beneficial to everyone. Despite the upheavals that the health crisis has caused, he believes that it has above all given more power to local populations in scientific research.

That was the positive side of COVID-19 , he says, a smirk. We are the guardians of the land. So it is quite logical that we give a more important role to the Inuit in the scientific sector.

Source: CBC Radio (this version was translated to English by Google Translate)

URL: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1793297/nunavut-science-chercheurs-pandemie-collaboration-communautes-inuit>