Whale Use Research in Torngat Mountains National Park

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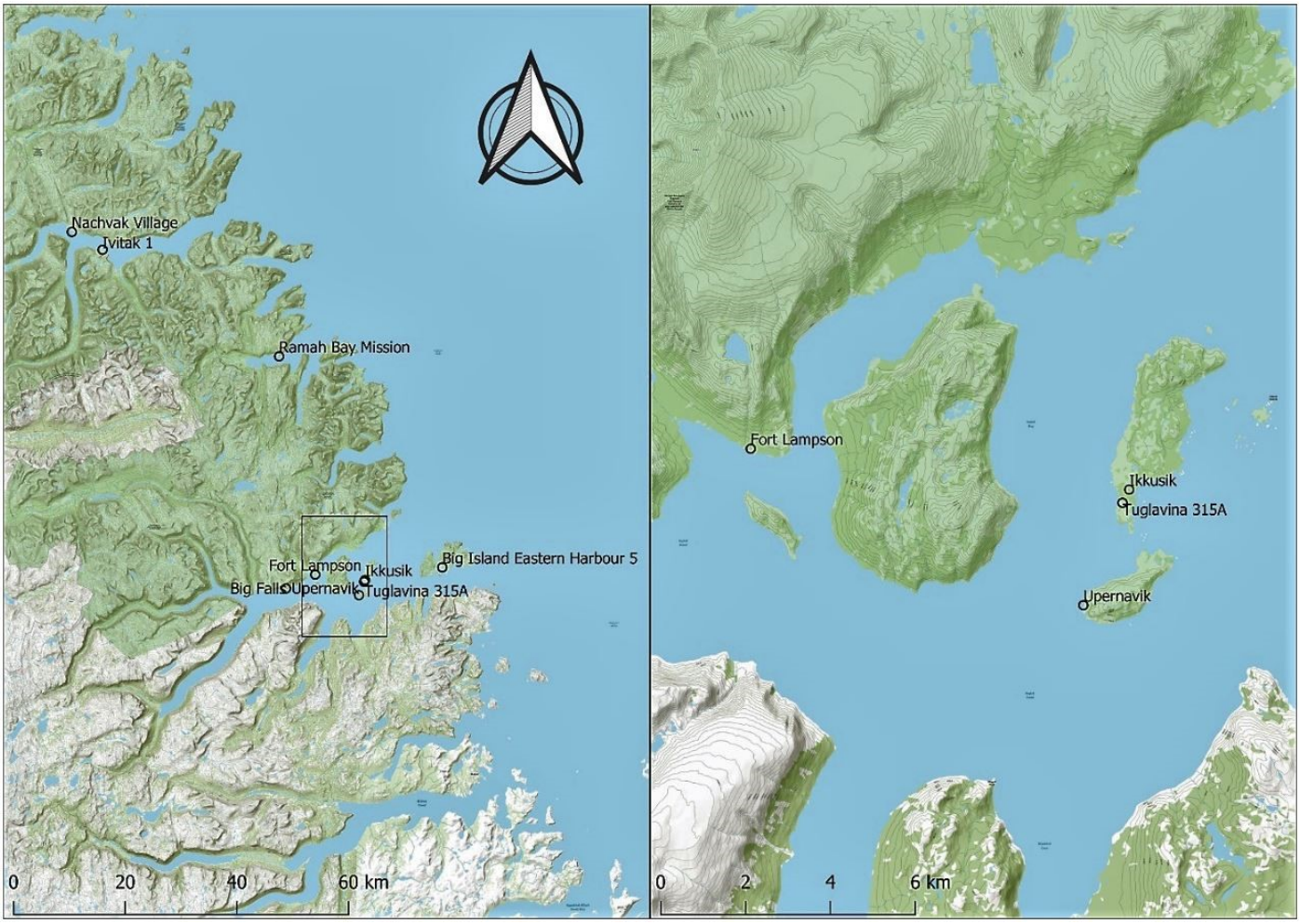


Figure 1: Project sites visited in TMNP in 2018

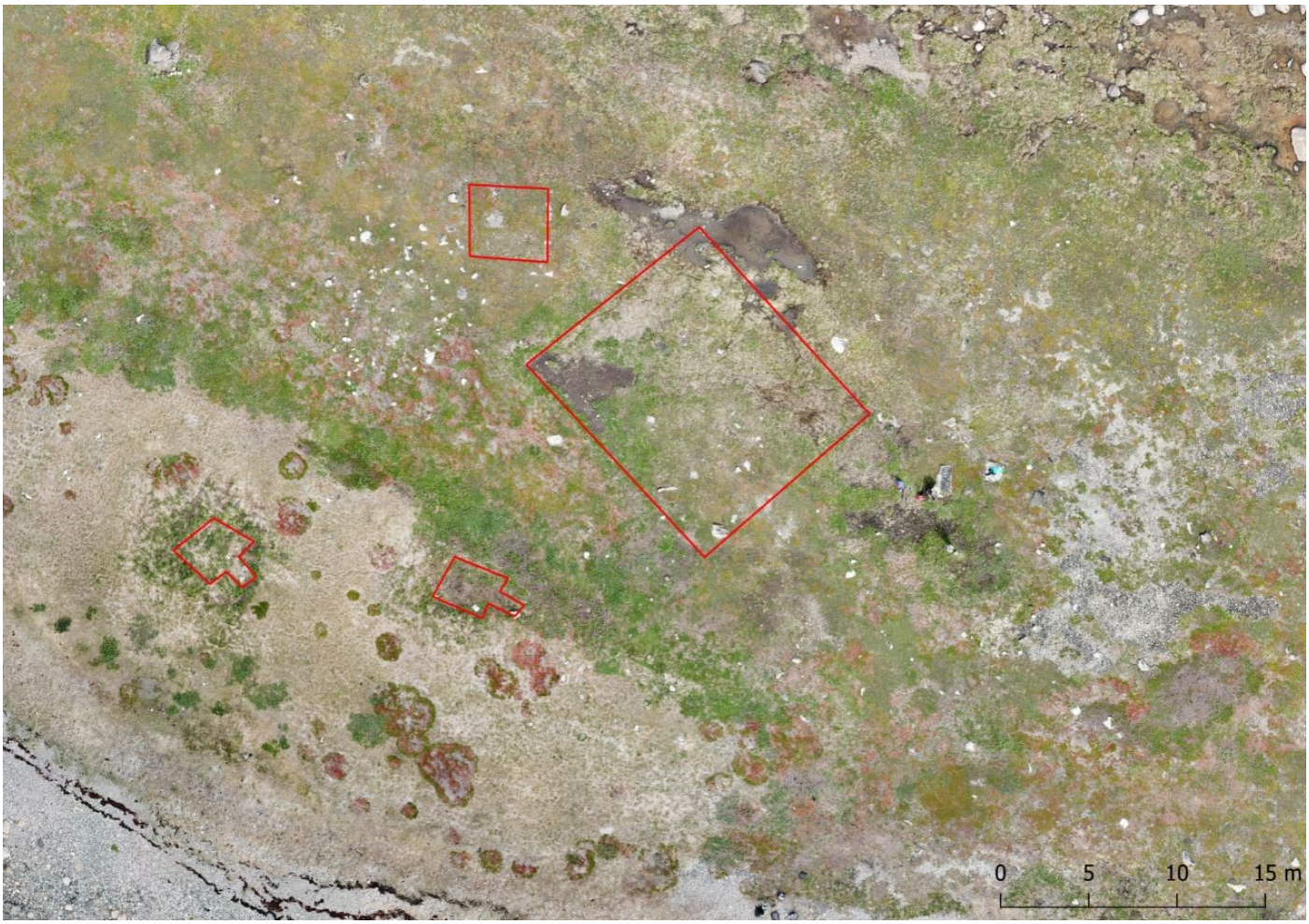
In August 2018, I undertook a brief but productive period of fieldwork in the Torngat Mountains National Park (TMNP) in northern Labrador, out of the Torngat Mountains Base Camp and Research Station. Between August 2nd and 14th, with the assistance of Nancy Nochasak (Nunatsiavut Archaeology Office summer student) and Corey Hutchings (Parks Canada archaeologist) I visited nine previously-documented Inuit sod house sites within the park. As my PhD project focuses on untangling the history and the archaeological signature of Labrador Inuit whaling and whale use, sites were targeted based on their potential to contribute to that realm of knowledge. These site visits were conducted in order to collect a series of aerial images with a Mavic Pro Platinum unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) to construct high-resolution site maps and 3D models, and to collect samples of matrix for fine screening adjacent to previous excavations to augment existing museum collections. Together, these data sets will allow for an examination of whale use from the micro- (bone debitage from working whale bone) to the macro-scale (use of whale bone as a building material, and intra- and inter-site comparisons of house and settlement structures related to

Figure 2: Metal tag on surface at Big Island Eastern Harbour 5

whale use). These sites (Figure 1) and activities are described below, in the order they were visited.

Big Island Eastern Harbour 5 (IdCq-05/375A) This site is located in a small cove on the eastern side of the southwestern point of the Big Island, and is comprised of the stone foundations of six recent (ca. 1950s) fishing cabins, several tent rings and stone caches, and the remains of two sod houses, excavated by Peter Schledermann in 1969 and dated to the early 1900s (Thomson 1982). Because of significant disturbance to the sod houses, and their relatively recent date of occupation, no collection occurred, though surface finds were photographed (Figure 2) and a drone course was flown over the site to create an accurate site map. In an attempt to reconcile old site records with features on the ground, we explored the area of the point to the west, aided by Nunatsiavut youth camp students armed with survey flags. To our surprise, their flags revealed a pattern of Ramah chert

Figure 3: UAV aerial view of Fort Lampson structures (red). HBC structures upper right, sod houses lower left. Largest HBC structure is approximately 10x13 m; smaller structure is 4x4 m.



lithic scatter related to a previously-undocumented probable Maritime Archaic longhouse (see Hutchings, this volume). Not a bad first day out.

Fort Lampson (IdCs-15/ 298A)

Fort Lampson is the site of a short-lived Hudson Bay Company post (from 1867 to 1878) on the north shore of Saglek Fiord in Branigan Cove (Thompson 1988). The site is comprised of the faint outlines of the post buildings (dismantled upon abandonment), and two Inuit sod houses and numerous tent rings and caches, most of which are likely associated with occupations related to the trading post. A test pit placed in the entrance tunnel of each of the sod houses supports this affiliation, yielding small quantities of nails, glass, ceramics and pipe fragments consistent with a mid-late-19th century occupation, and the lack of an obvious midden (but a scant quantity of recovered seal and caribou bones) indicates a shorter-term occupation, perhaps by local Inuit in the employ of the post (as indicated in post journals). A drone course flown over the entire site enabled the creation of an aerial orthophoto, which revealed the outlines of the post buildings that had been impossible to distinguish among the cryoturbation and partial flooding on the ground, and highlighted the proximity of the sod houses to those buildings (Figure 3). As this cove formed part of a proposed hiking route into the park interior, this georeferenced photo will be used in planning a route that avoids damaging archaeological features.

Upernavik (IcCr-10/ 338A)

This site became the major focus of the 2018 TMNP work. This site is located on the western tip of Upernavik Island, and was first recorded and tested by Peter Schledermann in 1970 (Schledermann 1971). The site currently comprises the remains of at least five sod houses, though some of these houses display clear evidence of periods of remodelling (Figure 4). Several tent rings, stone caches, and a large stone grave are also located on this small green point of land. Based on house architecture and visible surface and recovered artifacts, the site appears to have been occupied at least as early as the late 18th century and more-or-less sporadically likely as recently as the early 20th century. An interpretive tour of the site was later given to park visitors and the Torngat Cooperative Management Board. This site was photographed by UAV, and matrix samples were collected from one of the houses displaying clear episodes of remodelling. Based on late 18th century census data, some portion of this site is very likely contemporaneous with Ikkus-

Figure 4: Upernavik, upper terrace houses, view from helicopter

Figure 5: Ramah Bay Mission from helicopter. Mission cemetery and building foundations along the shore to the left, sod house row along the shore to the right. Note the proximity to active shoreline.

Figure 6: Big Falls, cobbles of Iceberg chert of varying colours (note superficial similarity to Ramah chert – Iceberg has a waxy, rather than sugary, texture).

ik or Tuglavina (or both) on Rose Island (Taylor 1974), though further research is yet ongoing.

Ramah Bay Mission (IfCt-03/ 231A)

Because of its unique history as a mission station that had not been built near an existing Inuit winter settlement, and because of the relatively high volume of unsupervised visitor traffic this site receives every year, the Ramah Bay Mission site was seen as a priority for further UAV photography, having been surveyed in 2017 (see Higdon and Weatherbee 2018), to aid in site monitoring and in the creation of low-impact visitor interpretation plans. We arrived by helicopter in the morning of August 5th. After a quick walk-over to determine UAV flight limits, this extensive site was aerially-photographed, and we were then joined by visitors travelling north by speedboat, and by other park visitors in a private helicopter. Because of the high visitor traffic and the proximity of some of the mission building foundations and Inuit sod houses to the active beach (Figure 5), this site is deserving of increased monitoring and further study.

Figure 7: Big Falls panorama, view south from north edge of site. Overgrown sod houses in middle foreground, tent rings in middle and right background, outflow of Big Falls to the far right. Active erosion occurring along eastern shore of site (left in photo, see Figure 8).

Big Falls (IcCt-02/ 304A)

This site is located on the north shore of Saglek Fiord, about midway between Nachvak Brook to the west and Fort Lampson/Branigan Cove to the east, just east of a large waterfall within which is found an outcrop of Iceberg chert (boulders of which can also be found scattered throughout the area, and cobbles of which have been used as tent hold-down rocks) (Figure 6). The Inuit component of the site (as the site has been most extensively investigated for its Dorset component) is composed of the remains of three large Inuit semi-subterranean sod houses, all fully excavated by Schledermann in 1970 (Schledermann 1971; Tuck 1975). Unfortunately, the complex topography and archaeology of this extensive site, and the heavy covering of dwarf birch brush within the houses (Figure 7), resulted in our failure to locate the sod houses until late in the day, and bad weather on two occasions prevented our returning to the site to further investigate. Because very little has been published on the Inuit occupations of the site, and because of its multi-component nature and source of a widely traded lithic raw material, and especially due to the rapid erosion of the sandy, unsheltered terraces (Figure 8), this site is deserving of further in-depth study.

Tuglavina (IdCr-01/ 315A)

This site is located on the west side of the southern tip of Rose Island, and is comprised of the remains of 14 Inuit sod houses dating from the 18th to the 19th century, one of which was fully excavated by Schledermann in 1970. The early components of this site appear to be contemporaneous with those of Ikkusik (below), while the later (late 18th century and 19th century) components are almost certainly contemporaneous with Upernavik (above). As the island is considered a Special Management Area, permission was obtained from the Torngat Cooperative Management Board to conduct low-level UAV flights over this site and Ikkusik, under the supervision of Nunatsiavut Elder (and bear guard) Eli Merkuratsuk. The Tuglavina site overlooks a low, sandy beach, which is flooded at high tide, but at low tide is exposed and connects the larger, northern portion of the island on which the site sits with the smaller southern portion. Rose Island, or Sallikuluk, was formerly known as "Saeglek", meaning "low area of land", in reference to this tidal beach (Schledermann 1971:28), on which captured whales might have easily been hauled at high tide, to be butchered as the tide went out.

Ikkusik (IdCr-02/ 325A)

This site is located on the southeast side of Rose Island, and is comprised of the remains of at least 20 distinct sod houses (most of which are communal) dating from the 16th to the 19th century, all of which

were tested and three of which were excavated by Schledermann in 1970 (Schledermann 1971). Upon cursory examination, several of the impressive house remains contain the crania, mandibles, and other elements of large whales. As with Tuglavina, a low-level UAV flight was conducted and aerial images captured to create a high-resolution orthophoto and 3D model.

Nachvak Village (IgCx-03/ 181A)

This site is located on the north shore of Nachvak Fiord, opposite the junction of Tallek and Tasiuyak Arms, and is comprised of the remains of 15 sod houses dating to the late 15th to the late 17th/early 18th century, four of which (and the midden of one more) were excavated by Peter Whitridge from 2003-2006 (Whitridge 2006). This site was of particular importance to the project because I had previously analysed faunal remains and artifacts from the site, and the assemblage of identified whale bone will form a critical component of my dissertation, as Nachvak Fiord was historically documented as one of the most successful for Inuit hunting of bowhead whales. A drone flight was conducted over the village site (challenging, due to high winds), and samples were collected from the middens in front of two of the previously-excavated houses, followed by a quick lunch and a jaunt by helicopter over to Ivitak (below).

Ivitak 1 (IgCw-01/ 201A)

This site is located on the south shore of Nachvak Fiord, in Ivitak Cove, east of Tallek Arm, and is comprised of the remains of 11 sod houses all dating to the trading post period (19th and early 20th century). Ramah chert flakes were observed on the beach in front of the houses, having eroded out of the house row bank. This site was of interest because it is presumed to have been occupied as the residents of

Figure 8: Big Falls, eroding terrace along southeastern margin of site. Iceberg chert boulder in right foreground.

Kongu (the communal house site further east down the fiord, established upon the abandonment of Nachvak Village) relocated to be closer to the HBC trading post established in 1868.

Conclusion

Although analysis is only in preliminary stages, from revisits and UAV photography, it seems that in this region, villages that were hunting whales (known from Moravian accounts in the 18th and 19th centuries, and through previous excavations) have larger archaeological footprints, were occupied for longer periods, and in some cases, saw episodes of remodelling and re-use of existing spaces and materials. Disentangling the reasons for this will be a primary goal moving forward. Despite occasional weather and logistical difficulties, this season was a resounding success, and demonstrated that the goals of academic archaeology, tourism, and site monitoring, management, and conservation can sometimes dovetail beautifully.

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