In the Footsteps of Murdoch & Ray
International Polar Year Collections, Then & Now

Perhaps the most lasting product of all the scientific output from the 1st International Polar Year (IPY) is John Murdoch’s volume *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition*, originally published in 1892, in the 9th Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, and reprinted in 1988 by the Smithsonian Institution Press. Likely it is the only publication from the original IPY which still is consulted routinely, if not daily, by researchers. The book has some limitations as an ethnological study, as noted by the author, but it remains a comprehensive and valuable review of the material culture of Barrow area residents during the 1st IPY. Murdoch’s book also is highly regarded by today’s Iñupiat residents of Alaska’s North Slope. In fact, the foreword to the 1988 Smithsonian reprint was signed by the North Slope Borough Iñupiat Commission on History, Language and Culture.

We propose a straightforward modern version duplicating Murdoch’s project. Using categories used by Murdoch, and a few useful additions (communications equipment and navigation devices spring to mind), the project will document modern equivalents of the items Murdoch collected and their uses. Photographic and written documentation will require modest expenditures. In discussions with Jana Harcharek, head of Bilingual Education for the North Slope Borough School District, it has been determined that much of the documentation can be accomplished as part of the school curriculum by involving students with Elders. If there is interest on the part of a museum (e.g. the Iñupiat Heritage Center in Barrow or the Smithsonian Institution where the original IPY collection is held) and funding is obtained for conservation and curation costs, then in addition to documentation, the new project could collect examples of reasonably sized items (airplanes and front-end loaders would not join the collect). In any event, some small working collections by students for classroom use would be obtained.

Project documentation would provide a valuable resource for comparative studies of material culture change through time. The project’s value would be enduring and would only grow through time, as happened with the material collected during the 1st IPY, leaving a legacy for future generations of researchers.

The project also will provide curriculum development material, both for use within the North Slope Borough School District (NSBSD) and more broadly. The NSBSD already uses ethnographic materials in curriculum development, and their staff is experienced in this process. In addition, the project presents broad possibilities for use in informal science education, including Web sites and science center and museum displays.
The project also would attempt to duplicate photographs, ethnographic and otherwise, taken by the 1st IPY expedition in the Barrow area. A cursory examination of published IPY photos reveals major changes in the Barrow landscape, especially at the beaches. Sturm and colleagues (2001) have demonstrated that comparative analysis of photographs taken at the same locations over periods of generations are productive in assessing long-term landscape changes.

In addition to contributions to archaeology, ethnography, material culture studies, and formal and informal educational activities, the proposed project also offers the advantage of helping to highlight the history of the IPYs, and the history of science in Barrow in particular. It will complement an exhibit on the 1st IPY expedition to Barrow that is planned for the UIC Science Center at the former Naval Arctic Research Laboratory facility.

Bibliography

Murdoch, John

Sturm, M., Racine, C., & Tape, K.