



EDGEWISE

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Who knows more about northern weather than the people most affected by it?

by Patty Pitts

For most of us, a change in the weather is just an inconvenience—the need to pick up an umbrella or throw on a raincoat. But for those in the North, a change in the weather can mean life or death. Arctic storms can pummel ships, trap hunters out on the land and destroy shoreline infrastructure that connects isolated communities with the outside world.

UVic geographer David Atkinson wants to help northern residents—in Canada and Alaska—prepare for the impact of Arctic storms and mitigate their effects. His research on Arctic coastal storm surges and analysis of the weather information from RCMP constables posted in unconventional remote hamlets, the Indigenous residents who themselves to establish the research priorities “Usually researchers come in with an agenda,” says Atkinson. “Our work is guided and refined by the comments and observations of the residents in the area under study. We acknowledge the efforts and expertise of people who understand and monitor the environment in a way that we can’t. Essentially, they tell us what to analyze.”

In the far North, the wave action caused by storms can wreak havoc on airports and on the piers vital to annual supply barges. The impact is further complicated by the frequent presence of sea ice and frozen shorelines. Ice that is frozen on the shore protects it from waves like a sea wall, but large ice floes can be driven ashore by battering rams.

Out on the ocean, acquiring a better understanding of how weather drives wave action can assist shipping companies to protect their crews, their cargo and the passages the vessels sail through.

Along with fellow field researchers, he gathers information from RCMP constables posted in remote hamlets, the Indigenous residents who live throughout the area and northern industrial operators.

That’s why he’s headed north again this spring—to Tuktoyaktuk, Sachs Harbour and Ulukhaktok in the Northwest Territories—to interview residents about weather impacts and determine who could come south to learn how to work with MSC weather analyses themselves.

Atkinson hopes to launch this project in 2017 pending funding to cover the costs of