

Beaufort Gyre Exploration Project: Dispatch 22: Preparing to Walk on Water

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August 23, 2013

Years ago the lead scientists began planning a project to study the dynamics and physics of the Beaufort Gyre. Months ago the team was preparing for this year's expedition – planning, packing, pushing paperwork, organizing logistics, preparing equipment. Weeks ago we boarded the ship, unpacked gear, discussed ice-based operations, and began the deck-based work with the CTD and mooring recoveries and deployments. Yesterday we made final preparations to fly out onto the sea ice to collect ice cores, take measurements, and install an ice-based observatory.

I anticipated sleeping in until 5am this morning since we planned to go onto the ice after breakfast. Instead, Sigrid woke me up at 2:30 am to tell me that we weren't going onto the ice after all; the ice-based work was postponed a day. This meant I needed to relieve Genke from ice watch. I sluggishly stumbled out of bed and headed up to the bridge to ask Jeremy, the officer on duty, about the change of plans.

An extra day of preparation was good news, despite losing a few hours of precious sleep. Tomorrow the majority of the scientists on board will fly by helicopter out onto the ice. The team from Woods Hole will deploy several ice-mounted moorings that constitute the ice-based observatory. Others, including myself will collect ice cores, measure ice thickness with a 2 inch auger, and much more. I'll also deploy four drifting buoys for Jenny Hutchings from Oregon State University. These will be placed 10 nautical miles north, east, south, and west of the observatory to monitor how the ice pack deforms over time.

This is my first trip to the Arctic, and tomorrow will be my first experience walking out onto the frozen ocean. The amount of mental and logistical preparation that goes into ice-based work is non-trivial. We must plan for a number of contingencies: if the weather turns foul while we're on the ice, the helicopter can't fly and we may be waiting for hours before getting back to the warmth of the ship. If a piece of equipment breaks and we don't have a back-up or the tools to fix it, we don't get another chance to come back and try again. An extra day means a chance to triple check all of the gear, to add more organization to the containers of tools going out onto the ice, and to rehearse the sampling procedures one more time.

Stay tuned for Zoe's next dispatch on the results of tomorrow's work!

Last updated: October 19, 2015

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