The Cryosphere Discuss., doi:10.5194/tc-2016-201, 2016
Manuscript under review for journal The Cryosphere
Published: 9 September 2016

Rapid Wastage of the Hazen Plateau Ice Caps, Northeastern Ellesmere Island, Nunavut, Canada

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Abstract

Two pairs of small stagnant ice bodies on the Hazen Plateau of northeastern Ellesmere Island, the St. Patrick Bay ice caps and the Murray and Simmons ice caps, are rapidly shrinking, and the remnants of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps are likely to disappear entirely within the next five years. Vertical aerial photographs of these Little Ice Age relics taken during August of 1959 show that the larger of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps had an area of 7.48 km^2, and the smaller one 2.93 km^2. The Murray and Simmons ice caps covered 4.37 km^2 and 7.45 km^2 respectively. Outlines determined from ASTER satellite data for July 2016 show that, compared to 1959, the larger and the smaller of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps had both been reduced to only 5% of their former area, with the Murray and Simmons ice caps faring better at 39% and 25%, likely reflecting their higher elevation. ASTER imagery in conjunction with past GPS surveys documents a strikingly rapid wastage of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps over the last 15 years. These two ice caps shrank noticeably even between 2014 and 2015, apparently in direct response to the especially warm summer of 2015 over northeastern Ellesmere Island. The well-documented recession patterns of the Hazen Plateau ice caps over the last 55+ years offer an opportunity to examine the processes of plant recolonization of polar landscapes.

Keywords: Arctic, ice caps, mass balance, Little Ice Age, Hazen Plateau, Ellesmere Island, ASTER

1. Introduction

The Hazen Plateau of northeastern Ellesmere Island, Nunavut, Canada, is a rolling upland, with elevations rising from about 300 meters above sea level near Lake Hazen to over 1000 m along the northeast coast of the island. The plateau is unglaciated with the exception of two pairs of small stagnant ice caps - the unofficially-named St. Patrick Bay ice caps, and, 110 km to the southwest, the Murray and Simmons ice caps (**Figure 1**). They are collectively referred to here as the Hazen Plateau ice caps. The St. Patrick Bay ice caps are in an area with maximum elevations between 750-900 m; the Murray and Simmons ice caps are in higher terrain, ranging from 950 to 1100 m. The Hazen Plateau ice caps are interpreted as forming and attaining their maximum extents during the Little Ice Age (LIA, c. 1600-1850) (Koerner, 1989). Like much of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, the Hazen Plateau is presently a polar desert; annual precipitation is typically only 150-200 mm, with a late summer and early autumn maximum (Serreze and Barry, 2015). Summers are very cool but variable; assessed as part of a multiyear glaciological study (Braun et al., 2004), the average 10 m July air temperature at the Murray ice cap measured for the years 1999 through 2001, respectively, was 4.0^{o}C, 0.2^{o}C and 1.6^{o}C.

This paper documents the behavior of the Hazen Plateau ice caps over the past 55+ years. The analysis is based on a combination of aerial photography, direct mass balance measurements from several field investigations, GPS surveys of ice cap areas collected as part of these investigations, and data at 15 m resolution from the ASTER (Advanced Spaceborne Thermal Emission and Reflection Radiometer) instrument. ASTER flies onboard the NASA's Earth Observing System Terra satellite, launched in December 1999. It provides reflectance at a 15 m resolution and is a key asset of the international

GLIMS initiative (Global Land Ice Measurements from Space) for mapping glacier outlines (Raup et al., 2007; Kargel et al., 2014).

2. Previous Work

The first information on the St. Patrick Bay ice caps that we are aware of is oblique aerial photographs taken in late July of 1947 as part of the U.S. Operation Polaris Trimetregon Survey. These photographs show the ice caps standing out prominently against the snow-free tundra surface. Vertical aerial photographs collected by the Canada Department of Energy, Mines and Resources followed in August of 1959. Exposed surface dirt layers and stratigraphic layering are prominent on the St. Patrick Bay ice caps and the Murray and Simmons ice caps were also bare of snow. From digitizing the 1959 photographs and mapping the ice cap outlines (**Table 1**), the larger of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps then had an area of 7.48 km^2, and the smaller one 2.94 km^2. The Murray and Simmons ice caps covered, respectively 4.37 and 7.45 km^2 (Serreze, 1985; Bradley and Serreze, 1987; Braun et al., 2004).

In July of 1972, Canadian scientists H. Serson and J. A. Morrison surveyed the larger of the two St. Patrick Bay ice caps. They landed by helicopter in foul weather to find the ice cap totally covered with snow. They installed eight accumulation stakes along a roughly two kilometer transect partway across the ice cap. Later that same summer, on August 20-21, the ice cap was visited by G. Hattersley-Smith and A. Davidson, who noted a "partial cover of winter snow all around the ice margins for at least a kilometer" (Hattersley-Smith and Serson, 1973), a striking contrast with conditions depicted in the August 1947 and 1959 aerial photographs. They concluded that while the ice cap had been in decline (as suggested from the 1947 and 1959 photographs), by the early 1970s it had returned to good health, thickening slightly and extending its margins, consistent with a known shift towards cooler summers and increased precipitation over the eastern Canadian Arctic (Bradley and Miller, 1972; Bradley and England, 1978). The smaller St. Patrick Bay ice cap and the higher-elevation Murray and Simmons ice caps presumably exhibited the same behavior (Braun et al., 2004).

In 1982 and 1983, the St. Patrick Bay ice caps were the focus of detailed energy and mass balance investigations (Serreze, 1985; Bradley and Serreze, 1987; Serreze and Bradley, 1987). The stake network on the larger St. Patrick Bay ice cap was expanded and several stakes were installed on the smaller one. At the end of the 1982 field season in early August, the entire ice cap was bare ice with a well-developed cryoconite surface. Assuming that the 1982 melt season had largely ended by early August, the 1981/1982 mass balance for the larger ice cap was estimated at -0.14 m water equivalent. Based on the stake line installed in 1972, Bradley and Serreze (1987) estimated that the overall mass balance for the period 1972-1982 was approximately -1.3 m water equivalent. This result finds qualitative support in comparisons between the 1959 aerial photographs and subsequent vertical aerial photographs taken on 1 August 1978 showing that the larger and smaller of the ice caps had shrunk in area by 7% and 11% over that interval (Table 1). Like the 1959 photographs, the August 1978, photographs revealed a snow-free plateau and bare ice with a prominent ablation surface. Aerial photographs taken four years earlier, on 4 August 1974, showed broadly similar conditions. As part of the St. Patrick Bay Project, a network of stakes installed on the Simmons ice cap in 1976 (Bradley and England, 1977) was re-surveyed on 11 July 1983. Of the 18 original stakes, only 6 could be located; the others were presumed to have

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melted out. Based on these sparse data, Bradley and Serreze (1987) came up with a minimum mass balance estimate for the Simmons ice cap of -0.49 meters water equivalent over the period 1976-1983. Collectively, these observations provided strong evidence that the period of recovery argued by Hattersley-Smith and Serson (1973) was short-lived.

However, the summer of 1983 was fairly cool, an apparent exception to the overall pattern of mass loss since at least 1959. The snow never completely melted off the surrounding tundra. The 1982/1983 annual mass balance for the larger St. Patrick Bay ice cap was estimated at +0.14 m water equivalent, and given their high elevation, it is reasonable to assume that the 1982/1983 balance year for the Simmons and Murray ice caps was also positive.

To our knowledge no further visits were made to the Hazen Plateau ice caps until 1999, when C. Braun, D. Hardy and R. Bradley of the University of Massachusetts Amherst established a network of 11 accumulation stakes on the Murray Ice Cap, which was further expanded in the year 2000. A new network of 15 stakes was established on the Simmons ice cap in 2000. Winter snow accumulation was measured on both ice caps in late May of 1999 through 2001, and summer ablation was measured in late July and early August from 1999-2002. For the four years analyzed, 1999-2002, annual balances were negative for all years for both ice caps, ranging from -0.29 m (Murray ice cap in 2000) to -0.52 m (Simmons ice cap in 2001) water equivalent.

In the summer of 2001, C. Braun and D. Hardy used portable GPS to survey the perimeter of all four ice caps. Compared to 1959, the larger and smaller of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps had shrunk to 62% and 59% of their former areas. The Murray and Simmons ice caps covered 70% and 53% of their former areas (Table 1). Some of the accumulation stakes inserted into the larger St. Patrick Bay ice cap in 1982 and 1983 were located but all had melted out. Knowing how deep they had been originally inserted helped to pin down a minimum estimate of the mass loss between 1984 and 2000 of -1.01 m water equivalent (Braun et al., 2004). In the late summer of 2003, C. Braun mapped the margins of the Murray and Simmons ice caps via portable GPS by holding the device out the window of a low-flying helicopter. The same approach was used to assess the ice cap margins in 2006, this time by University of Massachusetts graduate student T. Cook.

From these studies, along with results from other glaciological investigations of the Canadian Arctic and the Arctic as a whole, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The Hazen Plateau ice caps are unlikely to be relics of the last glacial maximum, but rather formed during the Little Ice Age (LIA, c. 1600-1850) (Koerner, 1989). They may have retained their LIA extents through the first couple of decades of the 20th century (Hattersley-Smith, 1969), but have been in overall decline ever since. Braun et al. (2004) speculate from a mapped lichen trim line that the Murray ice cap may have attained a maximum LIA extent of about 9.6 km^2, over twice the mapped 1959 area of 4.35 km^2. Similar trim lines were observed around the other three ice caps and although not mapped in detail, strongly point to much more extensive ice cover during the LIA.

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- From the 1960s through part of the 1970s, the ice caps may have experienced a period of reduced loss or occasional growth in response to cooling over the eastern Canadian Arctic (Bradley and Miller, 1972; Hattersley-Smith and Serson, 1973; Ommanney, 1977; Bradley and England, 1978; Braun et al., 2004).
- Since then, apart from occasional years such as 1982/1983, annual mass balances of the four ice caps have been persistently negative (Braun et al., 2004).
- The behavior the Hazen Plateau ice caps is congruent with the general pattern of mass loss from Arctic glaciers with direct mass balance records (Dowdeswell et al., 1997; Dyurgerov and Meier, 1997; Koerner, 2005; Sharp et al., 2011; Mortimer et al., 2016), negative mass balances of Alaskan glaciers (Arendt et al., 2002) and, since at least the early 1990s for which information is available, the negative mass balance of the Greenland Ice Sheet (Shepard et al., 2012).

3. History of Change

3.1 Ice Cap Areas

Table 1 lists the ice cap areas from all available observations through July of 2016 in square kilometers and as a percent of areas covered in the 1959 aerial photographs. Clear-sky late summer (July or August) scenes of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps showing a strong brightness contrast between the ice and the bare, dark plateau surface, enabled manual mapping of the ice cap perimeters from ASTER for the years 2005, 2009, 2014, 2015 and 2016. For the Murray and Simmons ice caps, ASTER estimates were obtained for 2001, 2007 and 2016. For 2001, areas for the Murray and Simmons were available from both ASTER and the surface-based GPS surveys. Considering the GPS surveys for this year as ground truth, the ASTER areas for this year are accurate to within 1% for the Murray ice cap and 3% for the Simmons ice cap. It is assumed that this is representative of the accuracy of area mapping from ASTER for the other years.

As of July 2016, and Murray and Simmons ice caps cover 39% and 25% of the areas covered in 1959 based on the aerial photographs. By sharp contrast, both of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps in 2016 cover only 5% of their former area. Both have been reduced to ice patches, with the smaller ice body now covering a scant 0.15 km^2.

Table 1. Surface areas (km^2) and % areas compared to 1959 aerial photographs

	Larger St. Patrick Bay Ice Cap Area and % of 1959		Smaller St. Patrick Bay Ice Cap Area and % of 1959		Murray Ice Cap Area and % of 1959		Simmons Ice Cap Area and % of 1959	
1959	7.48[1]	100%	2.94[1]	100%	4.37[1]	100%	7.45[1]	100%
1978	6.69[1]	89%	2.74[1]	93%	------	------	------	------
1999	------	------	------	------	3.28[2]	75%	------	------
2000	------	------	------	------	3.15[2]	72%	------	------
2001	4.61[2]	62%	1.72[2]	58%	3.05[2](3.08[4])	70%	3.94[2](3.83[4])	53%
2003	------	------	------	------	2.91[3]	66%	3.31[3]	44%
2005	3.68[4]	49%	1.03[4]	35%	------	------	------	------

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2006	------	------	------	------	2.86[3]	65%	3.19[3]	43%
2007	------	------	------	------	2.76[4]	63%	2.92[4]	39%
2009	2.54[4]	34%	0.63[4]	21%	------	------	------	------
2014	1.03[4]	14%	0.29[4]	10%	------	------	------	------
2015	0.52[4]	7%	0.18[4]	6%	------	------	------	------
2016	0.35[4]	5%	0.15[4]	5%	1.72[4]	39%	1.84[4]	25%

[1]Aerial photographs, [2]Surface GPS surveys, *Braun et al.* (2004), [3]GPS helicopter surveys, [4]ASTER

Outlines of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps for 1959 from aerial photography, for 2001 from GPS surveys, and for 2014 and 2015 from ASTER are shown in **Figure 2**. The reduction in ice cap areas is striking. Note the obvious shrinkage even between the years 2014 and 2015. Shrinkage of the Murray and Simmons ice caps is similarly documented in **Figure 3**, but showing 1959, 2001 and 2016. The shrinkage of these two ice caps is clearly evident, albeit less pronounced.

Using the area estimates through 2002 and extrapolating forward, Braun et al*.* (2004) suggested that the Hazen Plateau ice caps would disappear by the middle of the 21st century or soon thereafter, and that, given their larger size, the Simmons ice cap and the larger of the two St. Patrick Bay ice caps would be the last to go. However, based on data through 2016 and extrapolating forward (**Figure 4**), it now appears that both of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps will disappear around the year 2020. Consistent with findings for other Arctic glaciers (e.g, Gardner et al., 2011; Sharp et al., 2011; Mortimer et al., 2016), there has been a rapid loss in ice-covered area since the beginning of the 21st century. Likely reflecting their higher elevation, the Murray and Simmons ice caps may yet persist until 2030-2040.

3.2 Links with Climate Conditions

The annual mass balance of low-accumulation ice caps and glaciers in the Canadian High Arctic is known to be primarily governed by summer warmth rather than winter accumulation (e.g., Bradley and England, 1978; Koerner, 2005). To place the behavior of the Hazen Plateau ice caps in a climate context, use is made of summer-averaged (June through August) 850 hectopascal (hPa) temperature anomalies from the radiosonde record at Alert, located on the northeast coast of Ellesmere Island (Figure 1) along with estimated summer temperature anomalies for the LIA. The Alert radiosonde record extends back to 1957. We use monthly mean records contained in the Integrated Global Radiosonde Archive (IGRA*,* Durre et al*.*, 2006), based on daily 00 and 12 UTC soundings. Summer averages (J,J,A) were eliminated if based on fewer than 70 values. The 850 hPa level is about 1400 m above sea level for a standard atmosphere, hence roughly 500-650 m above the surface in the vicinity of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps and 300-350 m above the surface in the vicinity of the Murray and Simmons ice caps. While arguably it might be better to look at the 925 hPa level, this level has many missing values in the IGRA record. The time series of anomalies, computed with respect to the standard averaging period 1981-2010, is shown in **Figure 5**.

Kaufman et al. (2010) took advantage of a variety of proxy sources (e.g., tree rings, ice cores, lake cores) to assemble a record of Arctic summer surface temperature anomalies that extend back 2000 years.

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From their analysis, LIA summer Arctic temperatures anomalies averaged around -0.6°C with respect to a 1961-1990 reference period. The 1961-1990 summer mean of -3.2°C from the radiosonde data compares to a mean of -2.6°C for 1981-2000. The latter period is hence about 0.6°C warmer. Assuming that temperature anomalies at the 850 hPa level have been similar to those at the surface, and that LIA conditions over the Hazen Plateau were at least broadly similar to those for the Arctic as a whole, these results imply that Arctic LIA temperature anomalies were about -1.2°C relative to a 1981-2000 baseline. This estimated LIA temperature anomaly is shown in Figure 5 as a dashed line.

If it is accepted that the ice caps were broadly in equilibrium with average LIA summer temperatures, Figure 5 points to generally strong negative annual balances from the beginning of the record through the early 1960s. This was followed by smaller negative and occasionally positive annual balances from the middle of the 1960s through about 2000, and a preponderance of strong negative balances from the beginning of the century through the present. For comparison with the radiosonde record, we also examined 850 hPa summer temperatures over the Hazen Plateau from the National Centers for Environmental Prediction/National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCEP/NCAR) reanalysis (Kalnay et al., 1996) which extend back to 1948. Given that the Alert radiosonde data are assimilated into the reanalysis, it follows that the radiosonde and NCEP/NCAR time series look similar for the period of overlap. The NCEP/NCAR records suggest that the period 1948-1956 not covered by the IGRA record was fairly warm overall, with mostly positive anomalies relative to the 1981-2000 baseline. The cooling between the late 1940s through the middle 1960s broadly corresponds to the cooling over the eastern Canadian Arctic such as discussed by Bradley and Miller (1972) and Bradley and England (1978).

Looking at some of the individual years, based on summer 1957 temperatures, the 1956/1957 annual balance must have been strongly negative. The same can be said for 1959/1960 and 1962/1963. By sharp contrast, the summer of 1972, when Hattersley-Smith and Serson (1973) visited the ice caps and remarked upon the extensive August snow cover over the plateau, was the coldest in the radiosonde record, and about 2°C below the estimated LIA average. There is also a clear contrast between 1982 (a known negative annual balance year for the St. Patrick Bay ice caps) and 1983 (a known positive balance year, with summer 850 hPa temperatures slightly below the LIA average). Given the low temperatures for the summer of 1992, which followed the 1991 eruption of Mt. Pinatubo, the balance for 1991/1992 was almost certainly positive. Measured negative balances for the Murray ice caps for 1998/1999 through 2001/2002 (Braun et al., 2004) are all consistent with Figure 5. Regarding the summer of 2013, the obvious exception to the pattern of recent warm years, the ASTER data and daily images from the Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) show extensive cloud cover through the summer, making it difficult to determine whether the snow cover ever entirely cleared off the plateau. The notable area reduction of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps between August 2014 and 2015 aligns with the very warm summer of 2015, essentially tied with 1957 as the highest in the record. From **Figure 6**, July 2015 temperatures at the 850 hPa level from the NCEP/NCAR reanalysis were 3-4°C above the standard 1981-2010 baseline over most of northeastern Ellesmere Island.

4. Conclusions

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Regarding accelerating wastage of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps since the dawn of the 21st century, the outsized warming of the Arctic in recent decades compared to the rest of the Northern Hemisphere (termed Arctic Amplification), is overall most strongly expressed during the cold season, and is not nearly as prominent in summer (Serreze and Barry, 2011). Nevertheless, from the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Sciences (GISS) analysis (http://data.giss.nasa.gov/gistemp/), the trend in July surface air temperatures over Northeastern Ellesmere Island over the period 1960-2015 is about 2^{o}C (expressed as a total change) which stands out compared to the rest of the Arctic. On the basis of a satellite-derived record (from MODIS) of summer land surface temperatures, the more recent period of 2000 to 2015 has seen an average warming rate over the Queen Elizabeth Islands of 0.06^{o}C per year, or a total of nearly 1.0^{o}C, most of this occurring between 2005 and 2012 (Mortimer et al., 2016). They associate this warming with increasingly negative mass balances for glaciers and ice caps in the region. However, conditions over the Hazen Plateau are highly variable, and the summers of 1957, 1960 and 1963 were almost as warm as those seen in 2015.

Rapid wastage of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps over the past 15 years likely also reflects a reduction in summer albedo as dirt layers become progressively exposed and accumulate at the surface. During the 1982 and 1983 field campaigns, it was observed that summer precipitation over the ice caps was typically in the form of snow, temporarily increasing the surface albedo and adding some mass. The frequency of summer snowfall has likely declined in the sharply warming climate over the past 15 years. Also, as suggested from the prominent decline in the area of the larger St. Patrick Bay ice cap between 2014 and 2015, when there is an especially warm summer, the thin collar of ice at the ice cap margins (a feature evident in from field observations) will be prone to completely melting. The less pronounced area reduction of the Murray and Simmons ice caps must partly be due to their higher elevation and relatively cooler summer conditions. However, the elevation difference is only about 200 m, which argues that the stronger response of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps to warming may also be related to ice thickness.

It is possible that the Hazen Plateau caps could see some temporary recovery given the large natural variability in the Arctic. However, as noted by Alt (1978) and Bradley and England (1978), for stagnant ice caps such as these, all it takes is one warm summer to erase any accumulated mass gains of a previous decade. Assessing variability and trends in Arctic precipitation is notoriously difficult, but as evaluated over the period 1950-2007, annual precipitation has generally increased across Canada, and especially across Northern Canada. At station Eureka in central Ellesmere Island, annual precipitation appears to have increased by at least 40% (Zhang et al., 2008). Trends over the plateau are not known, but this suggests that, if anything, precipitation changes are helping to buffer the ice caps from summer mass loss.

Paradoxically, perhaps, loss of the Hazen Plateau ice caps may open new research opportunities. As they recede, plant remains are exposed that can be dated and used to better understand the past climate history of the region. From radiocarbon dates on rooted tundra plants exposed by receding cold-based ice caps on Baffin Island, and knowing that the plants are killed when the snowline drops below the collection sites, Miller et al. (2013) were able to construct a record of summer temperatures over Arctic Canada for the past 5000 years. La Farge et al. (2013) discovered that ice loss in Sverdrup Pass,

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Ellesmere Island, has exposed nearly intact plant communities for which radiocarbon dates point to entombment during the LIA. They also found that these recently exposed subglacial bryophytes can regenerate, which may have important implications for recolonization of polar landscapes. The area surrounding the receding Hazen Plateau ice caps provides a unique opportunity to examine this process of recolonization in the High Arctic, as the rates of ice recession are now well-documented for the last 55+ years (Table 1).

Author Contribution: M. Serreze led the overall effort. C. Braun, D. Hardy, and R.S. Bradley provided GPS data and historical documents. B. Raup analyzed the ASTER data. All authors contributed to the writing.

Data Availability: Radiosonde data for station Alert are available at from the Integrated Global Radiosonde Archive (ftp://ftp.ncdc.noaa.gov/pub/data/igra/). ASTER data can be obtained through the NASA Land Processes DAAC (https://lpdaac.usgs.gov/).

Acknowledgements: This study was supported by the University of Colorado Boulder, the NASA Snow and Ice DAAC award NNG13HQ033 to the University of Colorado, and NSF Award 9819362 to the University of Massachusetts.

Competing Interests: None

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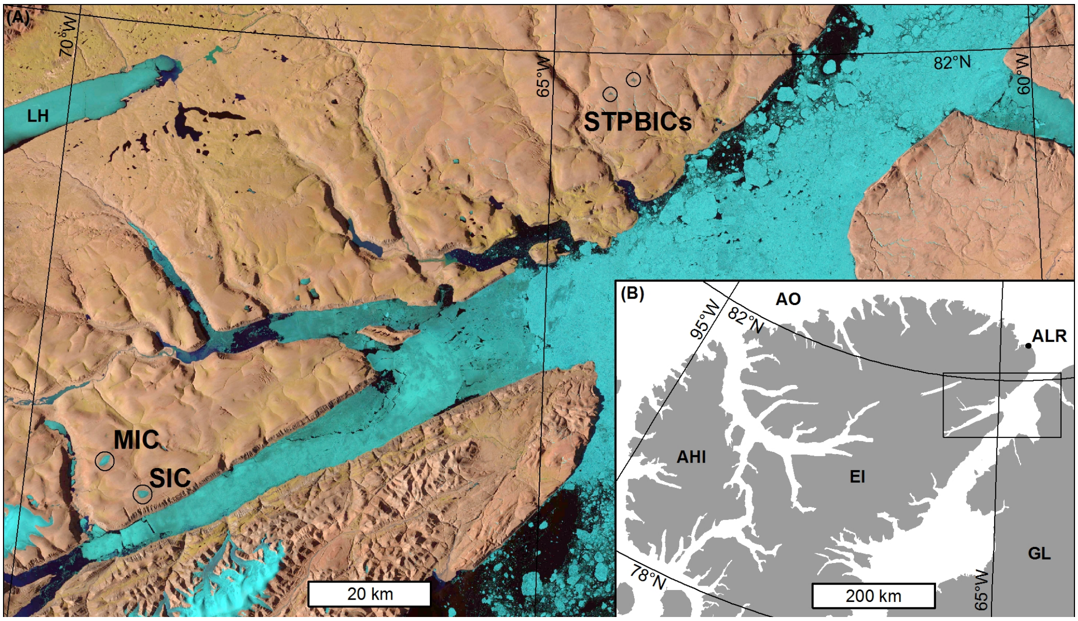

Figure 1. The location of the St. Patrick Bay (STPBIC), Murray (MIC) and Simmons (SIC) ice caps. The inset map shows Ellesmere Island (EL), Axel Heiberg Island (AHI), Greenland (GL), the Arctic Ocean (AO) and station Alert (ALR).

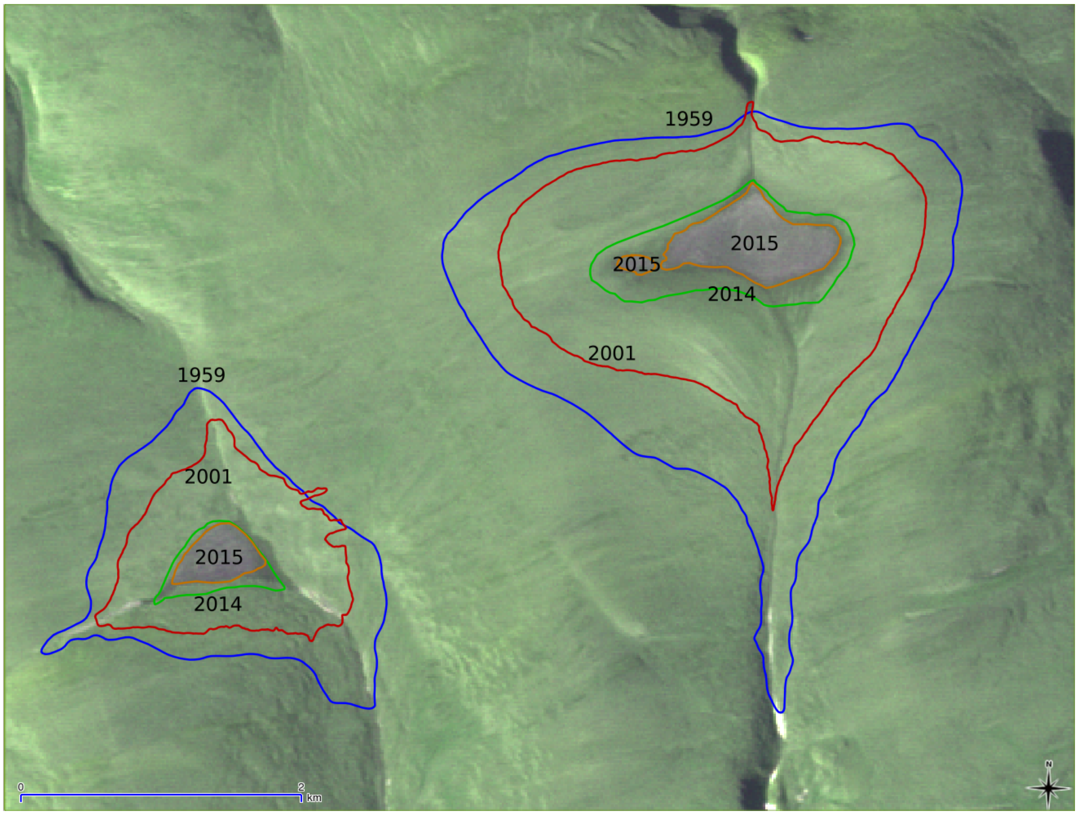

Figure 2: Outlines of the St. Patrick Bay ice caps based on aerial photography from August 1959, GPS surveys conducted during August 2001, and for August of 2014 and 2015 from ASTER. The base image is from August 2015.

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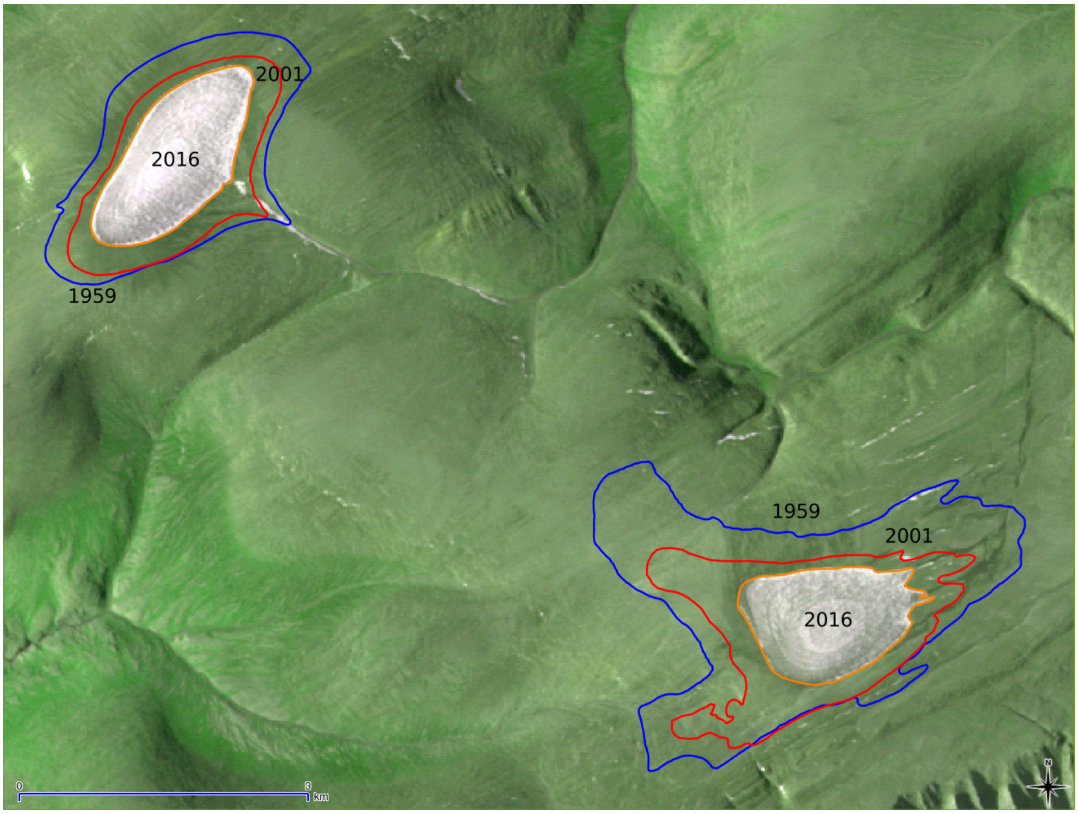

Figure 3: Outlines of the Murray and Simmons ice caps based on aerial photography from August 1959, GPS surveys conducted during August 2001, and for July 2016 from ASTER. The base image is from August 2016.

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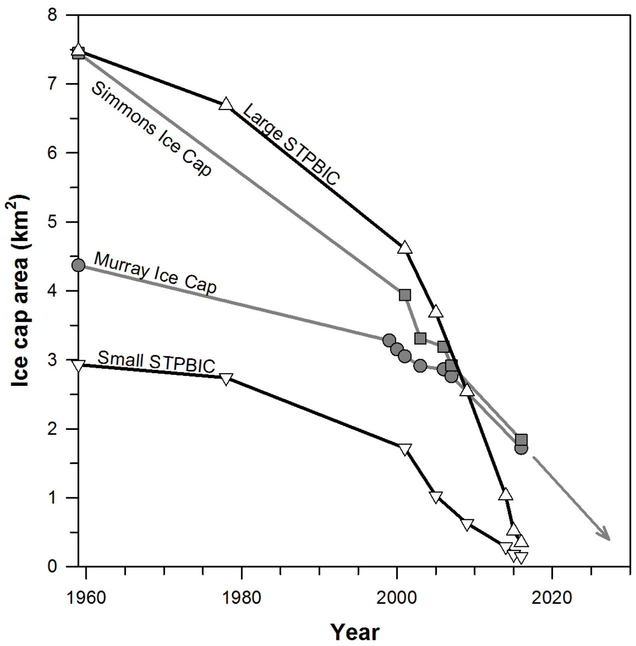

384 Figure 4. Time history of ice cap areas and projected times of disappearance.

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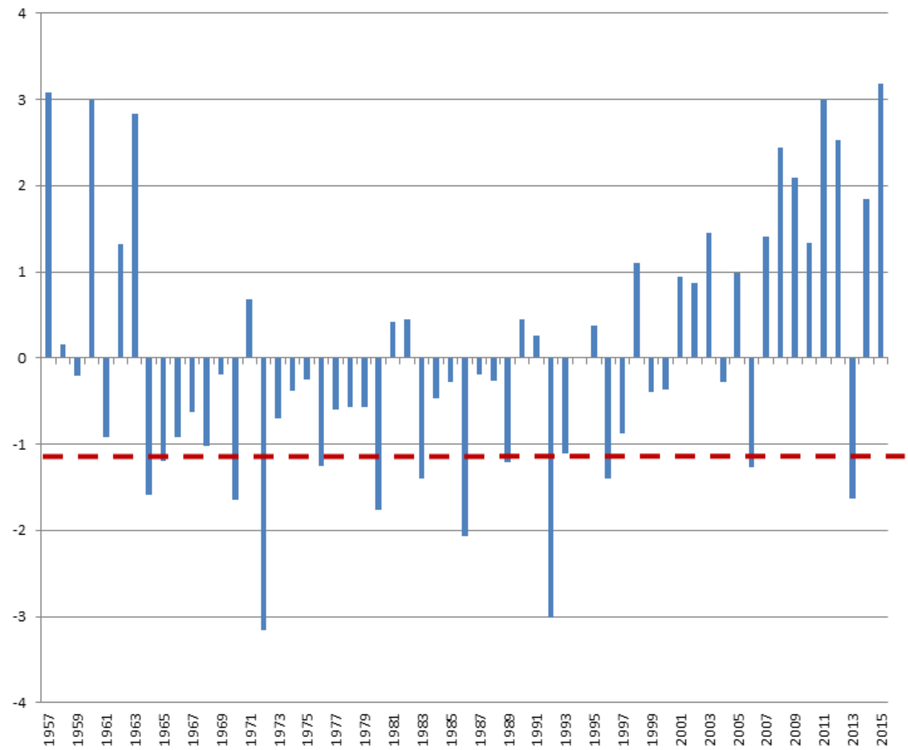

Figure 5. Temperature anomalies at the 850 hPa level (°C) over the period 1957-2016 (referenced to the period 1981-2010) from the Alert radiosonde record. The dashed red line shows the estimated summer average Arctic temperature anomaly for the LIA relative to 1981-2010.

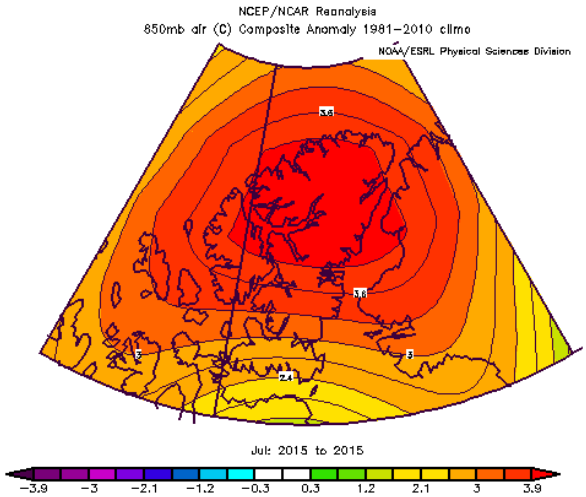

Figure 6. July 2015 air temperature anomalies at the 850 hPa level from the NCEP/NCAR reanalysis relative to a 1981-2010 baseline.