

A human geographer visits Tarfala Research Station

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Why Tarfala?

Over the course of the MSc I had developed an interest in knowledge production and how it is sited, and am fascinated by the problematic notion of the 'field'. Thanks to a series of coincidences, Tarfala resulted in becoming the field-site I was to visit; by chance, my supervisor happened to mention an interesting talk about arctic field stations. Through various contacts a transcript was obtained: interest grew and a name, Tarfala, caught the eye. The homepage was found and contact was established with the director. This article provides a brief overview of the research and tries to convey some of the experience.

I was delighted to spot the collection of buildings from the cockpit and enthusiastically pointed the way for the pilot. [Excerpt from diary, 06/07/08]

A micro-history of ice

This research, which formed an eventual dissertation, was interested in the panoply of field activities conducted in Tarfala Valley in northern Sweden. In this valley a long and detailed historical record exists for Storglaciären, a glacier there, which is seen as being incredibly accurate. And yet, there is little written detailing the methodologies employed and it is only now that documents – manuals – are being compiled which outline the various techniques. In fact, the methods are improvised each year, necessarily so, in a field site which is ever-changing. The research posed various questions: how is this field constructed and maintained from season-to-season, year-to-year? How does the work done come to be seen as generating important results or data? How is work even possible? The Tarfala Research Station has been at the site for almost as long as measurements have been performed and is reminiscent of a small village, with eleven huts in total. At once primitive and luxurious, without the station there would be no measurements. The Tarfala 'family', both literally and figuratively, is perhaps as unpredictable

as the ice, with new people visiting the station all the time. The sense of community, like the field, emerges from never-ending (re)negotiations. Both the field and the community rely on the other in order to come into being; as such there would be no station without the ice and no data without the researchers. The micro-history of ice, the title of the dissertation, hints at the multiple and emergent histories which are necessarily entangled at the site. Essentially this study aimed to tell a 'small story' (Lorimer, 2003) of the work which takes place at Tarfala, both on the ice and at the station.

Glaciology is reliant on field research, which Deleuze & Guattari (1987) describe as a form of artisanal and itinerant practice (1987: 411) and not often laboratory experimentation. As Barry (forthcoming) notes, a field science is always entangled with the study of the particular in its environment and needs to attend to the specificity of the case. Local conditions pose local problems needing local solutions. In such circumstances, "science is an inescapable local practice. Here the good scientist is the skilled hand, the resourceful artisan" (Livingstone, 2003: 45). That science is a cultural practice is exemplified with particular clarity in the field: hands-on experience, routine improvisation, and performative rationality are all highly valued (ibid.). In this way, the field is constituted as such by academic projects and the activities of scientific investigators, including the stories scientists tell about it. Gregson & Rose (2000) argue that "space too needs to be thought of as brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power" (2000: 434).

Ethnography

This research is the result of an ethnographic study of Tarfala Research Station and my participation in monitoring programmes, discussions, maintenance and social activities over a three-week period (06/07/08-28/07/08), during their summer season. As such, I write about and reflect upon these events from within but I



Figure 1. “Laying an ice pick...” then noting it “in one of the waterproof yellow notebooks” (image: author).

do not presume to speak on its behalf. In addition to my own observations, experiences and discussions with those present at the station, this work results from an analysis of documentary evidence and reflective appraisals from within the community itself (such as the Special Issue of *Geografiska Annaler: A* in 1999). I went to Tarfala with an open mind, hoping to immerse myself in all that I could. In order to negotiate a reduction, typical student-fare, I worked as a *hantlangare* which loosely translates as ‘assistant’ and would help out around the station, as well as be part of the team which would go to *Storglaciären* to perform measurements there. Arguably, this level of involvement has helped shape the research project, allowing it to be affected by those present. Perhaps someone less involved would fail to appreciate the thrill of measuring a pole with a fold-up ruler, walking through metre-deep slush and needing to change shoes, or sitting at a tripod lowering an antenna, stopping every $\frac{1}{2}$ m. As Shapin (1998) argues, “if understanding is the aim, then there is no alternative to being there, being where knowledge is produced” (1998: 6).

Before arriving at Tarfala, I had no idea who would be there. Access to the site was negotiated in May 2008 and later, upon arrival, permission was required to participate in various activities. I chose to arrive a week after the summer season had started and planned to stay as long as possible, within a limited budget and with a dissertation deadline looming. My activities varied from day-to-day, depending on the schedule and activities of the advisors themselves, and I used a number of research methods to generate materials, employing not only *observant participation* but also interviews and some archival research. I undertook to maintain strict confidentiality, and have avoided using the names of my informants in my dissertation.

My involvement allowed me to learn a great deal about the practice of stake measurements and to see things that would not have been emphasized in interviews alone (Henke, 2000). I was also able to photograph many aspects of fieldwork, and to use the images as instruments for eliciting responses during discussions. In addition to fieldwork, I also attended the various meetings outlining the plans for the day

ahead and was involved in much of the station maintenance. A preference for informal conversations with those at the station did not preclude interviews; in fact, some people asked if I would interview them. These interviews were semi-structured; although I came prepared with questions (organised thematically), I let the interviewees dictate the length of their responses and allowed them to comment on any topic they wished. These interviews were recorded, using an Olympus WS-210S Digital Voice Recorder, and later transcribed, whilst in Tarfala. I also kept a diary, which I would often carry around with me although I tended to write an entry in one sitting; I would record myself a short message on the voice recorder if I had a thought that I wanted to note immediately. This diary was an outlet for my reflections, in what could be, at times, an intense environment. Field scientists experience places largely through work, yet the lines between work and leisure, are less clearly marked in the field than in many social arenas (Kucklick & Kohler, 1996: 14). Such ambiguities make field sites interesting and creative workplaces, both for scientists and for STS theorists.

Closing comments

Employing an ethnographic approach, this researcher was involved in the day-to-day activities at the station, situated at the foot of the glacier. By attending to where fieldwork dwells, the research tries to bring a sense of what field-life is like, in a site where work and play are, at times, indistinct. Drawing on Kohler’s (2002) notion of the practices of place and Latour’s (1999) historicity, this study uncovers the labour involved in (re)creating a history of ice, within a site of place-specific practices of knowing (Crang, 2003).

My time at Tarfala was both informative and exciting. I like to think that I left having made friends; I wonder to myself when I can next return. Nearly everyone I met, I am proud to say, has asked for me to send a copy of my dissertation: whilst this is encouraging and suggests that work at the interface of both human and physical geography is appealing, it is also challenging. Certainly it would be less demanding if I were to write without worrying about the people of whom I write. People: not mere research subjects. I wonder to

myself if certain amongst them will recognise parts of my work, whether or not they remember one of their own quotes, how they will respond to the text.

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Biographical notes

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Coda

...I went over to measure the old pole. This was my first taste of ice measurements, in the field (!) and I was excited. I took many photos and asked many questions throughout the few minutes it took. Laying an ice pick on the ice at the foot of the pole, I unfolded a ruler and double-checked that the tapings (every 2m) on the pole were correct. There were 4.97m visible of the stake above the ice and this was noted in one of the waterproof yellow notebooks that most people at the station seem to carry around with them. [Except from diary, 09/07/08]