Sketching the Polar Landscape

Sketching the Polar Landscape is a collection of drawings from my field research trips to Greenland and Antarctica from 2012-2015. In both Greenland and Antarctica, my research focuses on landscape evolution – how and why the landscape looks and behaves the way it does today – and so I spend a lot of time looking at my surroundings. Sketching offers me a new perspective on the landscape features I look at every day. When I draw a mountain, glacier, or flower, I'm forced to spend a lot of time staring at it, to consider it from multiple angles, and to notice things I've never seen before. By drawing, I connect to the landscape at a level I would never achieve by doing my detail-oriented repetitive fieldwork. Sketching in the field is an experience unlike drawing or painting at home. In Kangerlussuaq, Greenland, I constantly swat mosquitoes while I work, retreating to my mountain tent to finish a sketch without the annoying insects. In the McMurdo Dry Valleys, mornings and evenings are the best sketching times, since the winds are usually quiet and the light is beautiful. I put on my Big Red down jacket, wool hat, and liner gloves, and sketch outside until I lose feeling in my fingers. Although I do sketch at home – often a diagram or schematic for a presentation – I don’t ever feel the same sense of connection to my field sites as I do when sketching in the field.

– Ruth Heindel

Ruth Heindel is a PhD candidate in the Earth Sciences Department working with Professor Ross Virginia. She studies how current soil processes in the Polar Regions have been influenced by glacial activity. Ruth works in Kangerlussuaq, Greenland, where she studies wind-driven soil erosion, and in the McMurdo Dry Valleys, Antarctica, where she studies soil phosphorus cycling. Ruth has always been drawn to the beauty of extreme landscapes – she began traveling to the Polar Regions as a high school student and has been hooked ever since. Ruth started drawing and painting as a Waldorf school student in kindergarten. In high school, she kept a field journal for a science class on the native species of Vermont, and later taught the class to high school students. Teaching the importance of field journals to her own students convinced Ruth to sketch as much as possible during her first field season in Kangerlussuaq, Greenland. Drawing has now become an integral part of each field research season. Recently, Ruth has started selling prints and notecards of her sketches on her Etsy shop, PolarPrints.