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Researchers seek citizen scientists for northern plants project

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July 31, 2014 | Vol. 42, No. 22 | View PDF

Researchers heading two citizen-science projects documenting the seasonal life events of plants in Alaska and in Churchill, on Canada's Hudson Bay, are looking for participants – and timing is everything.

The climate in the North is changing rapidly. Spring arrives earlier, summers are warmer and fall arrives later. These changes affect the timing of plants' life events, such as leafing out, flowering, fruiting and dying – called plant phenology.

"Northern plants are programmed to shut down early, well before the light disappears or it turns cold," said Christa Mulder, project leader and a plant ecologist at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Institute of Arctic Biology. "If there's an extra month of summer, that's not a problem, but if non-native plants don't shut down at the same time as typical northern plants, they may gain a foothold and out-compete native plants."

The two citizen-science projects Mulder and her co-researchers have underway are FlowerTrackers, in Canada, and Project BrownDown, in Alaska. Both are based on Mulder's successful 2012 citizen-science project with white clover.

Changes in plant communities affect people directly by affecting when resources such as geese, caribou and berries are available. Project leaders Mulder and Kit Schnaars-Uvino, of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, designed Project FlowerTrackers to examine how plants are changing in Churchill, a town on the western coast of Hudson Bay in Canada's Manitoba province, and how those changes compare to other areas of continental North America, especially Alaska.

"Kids in remote communities have few opportunities to participate in scientific research, yet they often know a lot about the environment they live in," said Mulder. "By participating in this project, they will learn how to analyze and display data, determine whether or not what they see can be explained by changes in climate and have an opportunity to connect with kids in remote communities in Alaska."

At the first FlowerTrackers training July 14 in Churchill, participants learned about plant phenology and how it can be affected by climate change. They will practice all of the monitoring procedures, such as how to select a field site, identify plants and enter and upload data.

Participants will upload their data to the website Hands on the Land, where they can compare what their plants are doing to what plants at other locations in northern regions are doing. Data will also be shared with Canada's PlantWatch Program.

"We're especially excited that Wapusk National Park in Canada contributed iPad Minis for students to use in this summer's data collection," said Mulder. "They'll use the tablets to take pictures and enter data while they're in the field."

Once students are trained, they will select the plant species they want to track, mark five plants in a location they can visit frequently and collect data and take pictures throughout the summer.

"For Project BrownDown, we're looking specifically at what happens in the fall," Mulder said. "We found in previous research that non-native plants kept producing leaves 26 days longer than native plants. We want to know is this common across Alaska?"

Training for Project BrownDown will start Aug. 9 in Fairbanks, Alaska.

"We have had a 45 percent increase in the number of days above freezing in the past 100 years in Interior Alaska," Mulder said. "I don't think spring is the big deal, I think it's in the fall when non-native or potentially invasive plants may have a huge advantage because they could still be photosynthesizing after the native plants shut down."

Anyone interested in participating is encouraged to sign up on the project's websites.

"You don't need to have any experience with plants or computers," said Katie Villano Spellman, citizen-science project coordinator, about FlowerTrackers and BrownDown. "All you'll need is enthusiasm and a desire to learn."

BrownDown: sites.google.com/a/alaska.edu/projectbrown-down/home

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PlantWatch: <http://www.naturewatch.ca/english/plantwatch/>

HandsOnTheLand: <http://www.handsontheland.org/environmental-monitoring/melibee-project.html>.

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