# Biotoxicological risks and hazards of a thawing Arctic

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# Age of Permafrost

- Permafrost remaining from the last ice age (c. 115,000 – c. 11,700 years ago) and prior glaciations
- Contains organic carbon -plant and animal detritus, leads to carbon release in the Permafrost Carbon Feedback
- Rapid thaw in the last 50 years is changing structural dynamics of the tundra, releasing GHG and permafrost components
- Thaw dynamics based upon underlying structure of the permafrost and temperature

Miner et al. 2021 *Nature Climate Change, Solicited review*

Figure: Columbia University; Images: Wikicommons

# Yedoma and Thermokarst

- Yedoma can be 100,000 of years old and hundreds of meters deep- exposed by thermokarst development
- May contain viable microbes from the Cenozoic to modern times
- Known microbes include methanogenic microorganisms, responsible for releasing $CH_4$ and $CO_2$
- 2% carbon by mass, but 80-90% ice
- Potential for a 50% increase in released carbon when exposed to the atmosphere

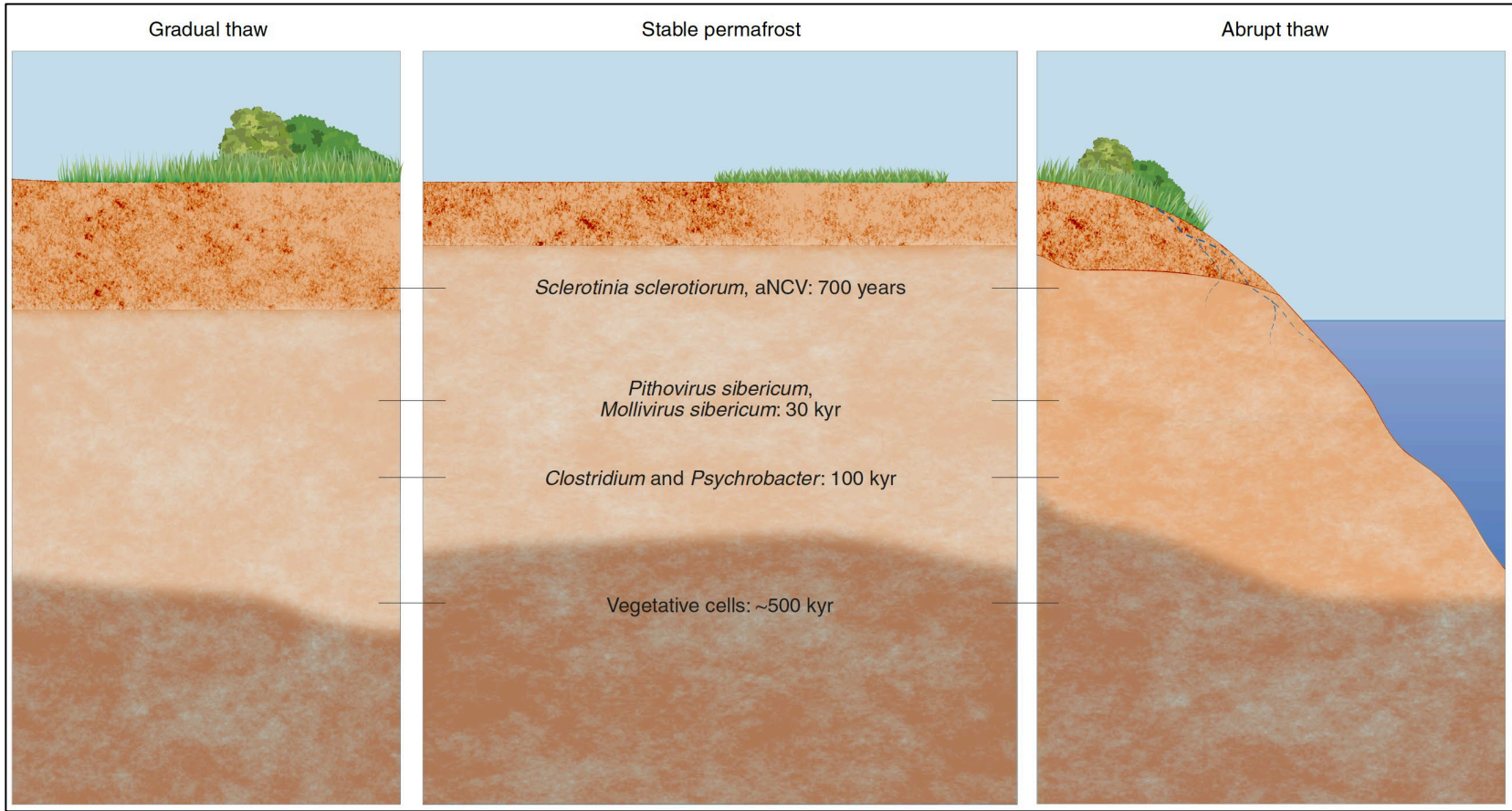
Images: Wikicommons

# Permafrost microbes

Images: Wikicommons

# Permafrost microbes

- Cold-adapted generalist microbes with lipid membranes still viable (extremophiles)
  - Cold methane seeps: ancient bacteria phylotypes related to *Loktanella, Gillisia, Halomonas,* and *Marinobacter* spp.
  - Brine lenses (100k-120kyr): *Clostridium* and *Psychrobacter*
  - Permafrost substrate (30kyr): intact virus species including Mimiviruses, Pandoraviruses, *Pithovirus sibericum, Mollivirus sibericum*
- Unknow bacteria, viruses and microbes
  - Up to 1 million years old
  - ‘Methuselah’ microbes




Miner et al 2021, Nature Climate Change

# Permafrost microbes

- The Plague, Black Death, Small Pox and unknown viruses including new ”Alaskapox”
- Antibiotic resistance in some species
  - bacteria resistant to chloramphenicol, streptomycin, kanamycin, gentamicin, tetracycline, spectinomycin, and neomycin have been recovered (15-290kyr)
- Other potential ‘eradicated’ diseases

Images: Wikicommons

# Potential Impacts

- Anthrax release in Siberia suspected in death of 200 reindeer and a child in 2016
- Graves of Smallpox victims excavated in 2016, 2019
- Microbes from 700-yr old Caribou cloned into modern plant in 2014
- Exploration of microbiome in unprotected labs ongoing
- Exposure can expand with tourism travel to the Arctic

# Anthropogenic contamination

Images: Wikicommons, NYT

# Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs)

- Organic chemicals including DDT, HCH, PCBs deposited atmospherically
  - 2019, 2020 studies show human risk from fish consumption
  - High concentrations- DDT (10 ng/L) , PCB (~4.5 ng/L), and HCH (~20 ng/L)  in glacier ice and permafrost
  - Plastics, fragrances, and plasticizers (PAHs, PFAS, brominated flame retardants)

Images: Wikicommons, NYT

# Heavy Metals

- Heavy metals Arsenic (As), Cd, Nickel (Ni), and Mercury (Hg) from mine tailings and atmospheric deposition
- One open pit mine: Cd (1 – 4 mg/kg), Ni (1000 – 1500 mg/kg), and Hg (40-120 mg/kg)
- Estimated 384- 1,656 ± 962 Gg Hg in the top three meters of soil
- Bioaccumulation in fish may see an increase of up to 222% by 2300
- *Glaucous Gull* species show high levels of Hg (4.9 ug/g), PCB (3326 ng/g), and DDT (2367 ng/g)

Images: Wikicommons, NYT

# Nuclear waste

- 1955-1990, the Soviet Union conducted 130 nuclear weapons tests in the Novaya Zemlya Archipelago
  - 224 separate explosive devices, releasing ~265 megatons of nuclear energy
  - Kara Sea sediments contain up to 11,000 Bq/kg of Plutonium, 3-4x larger than the background
  - Sunken ships excluded from cleanup account for ~8860 TBq of radiation
- Camp Century: radioactivity of ~$1.2 \times 10^{9}$ Bq including physical waste, diesel fuel & PCBs, and sewage
- 1968 Thule bomber crash >$4.6 \times 10^{12}$ Bq of Uranium and Plutonium on Greenland ice sheet

Images: Wikicommons, NYT

# Contaminant release

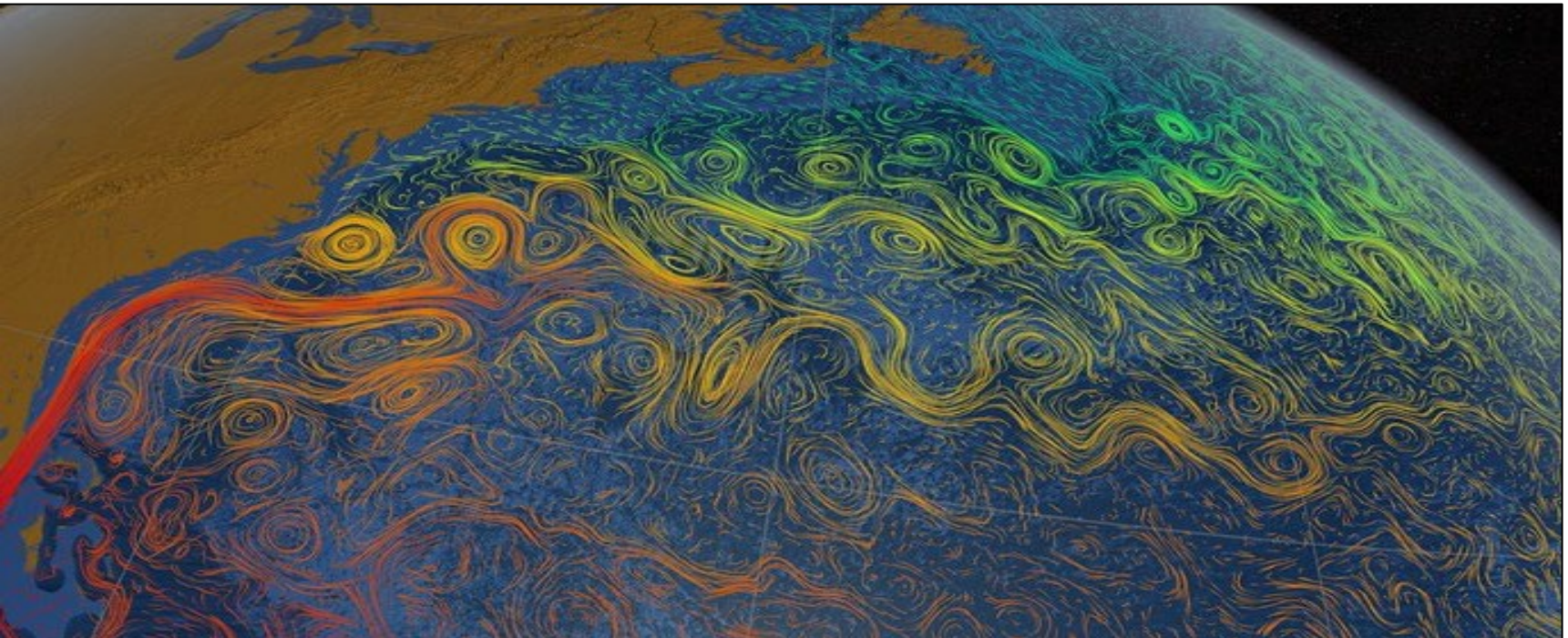
- Melt and thaw of ice and permafrost
- Release during industrial use (storage and seepage)
- Nuclear materials mined, utilized or stored in the Arctic
- Release from accidents, global transport or shipwrecks
- Oil drilling, transport and infrastructure leaks

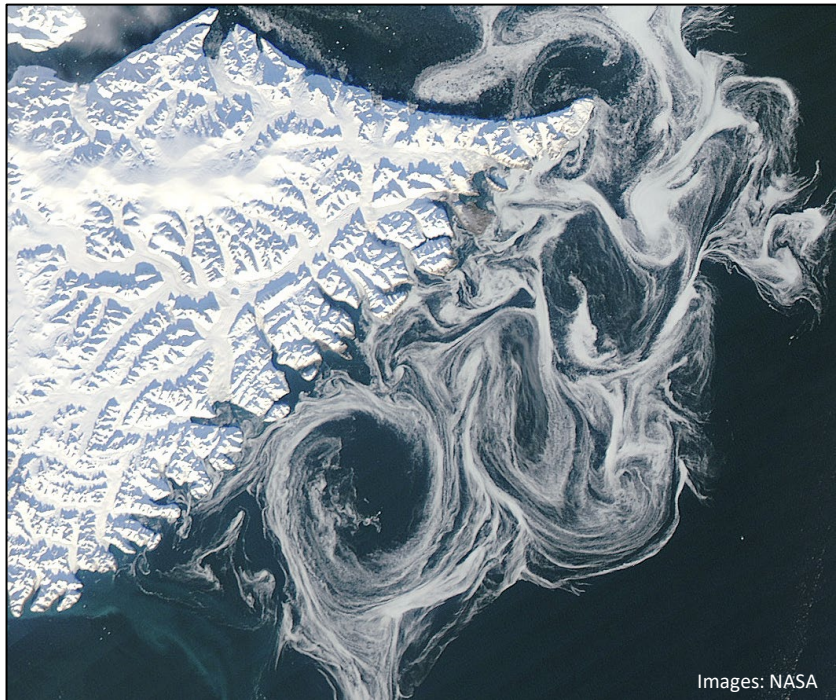


Images: Wikicommons WAPO

# Could Arctic hazards transport globally?

- Potential introduction of old bacteria, viruses, and microbial life into land and ocean
- Atmospheric remobilization of chemicals and toxins stored in the Arctic
- The ‘greening’ of the Arctic and changing hydrology
- A possible route for microbial contamination in freshwater





Images: NASA

# Next Steps

- NASA-ESA Arctic Methane Challenge
- Core sampling in permafrost tunnels, flow modeling in Greenland
- Combined satellite and in-situ monitoring
- Work with Mars Rover tools- linking planetary exploration and extremophiles

# Next steps: microbes in permafrost and in space

- Goal: To find, characterize and index the permafrost microbiome, developing a greater understanding of niches supporting life
- Sampling permafrost from 10-130,000 years old in Alaska
- Proof of concept in Greenland & on the Mars Perseverance a similar instrument (SHERLOC) with same laser system
- **If we can identify ancient, extremophile organisms on Earth, successful recovery from similar extraplanetary environments may be possible**

**SHERLOC**

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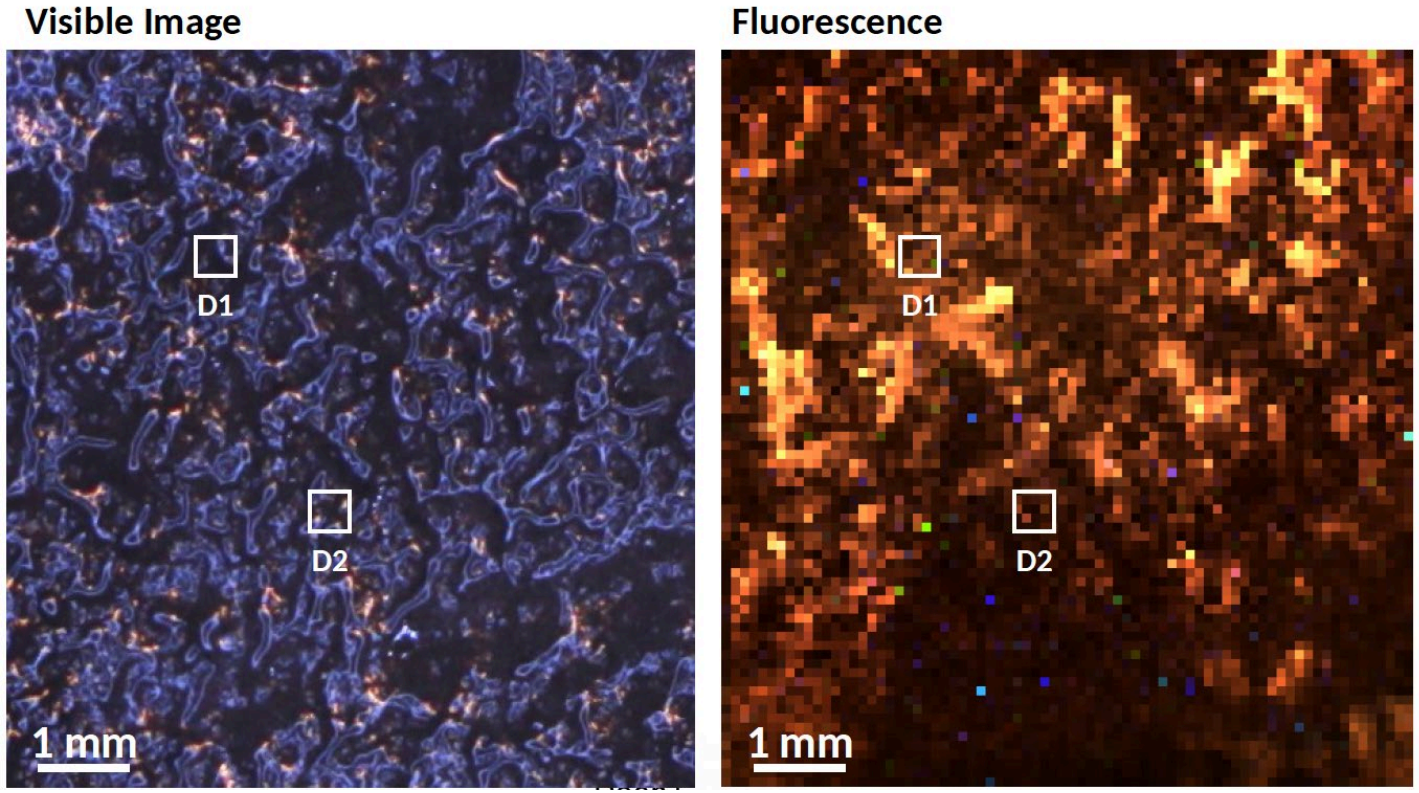

# Questions?

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Figure: Victor Leshyk

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