

RISE TO THE CHALLENGE: DARK ICE PROJECT

Three polar explorers have been preparing exhaustively for the Dark Ice Project, an expedition that will involve spending all of next winter on the Arctic Ocean, sailing and skiing towards the North Pole in time for the return of the sun in March 2021, carrying out research as they go. Naturally, the clothing they wear will be critical to their ability to reach their objective. A number of textile and apparel partners have joined forces give the three the best kit possible.

Into the dark places

The Woolmark Company is to be one of a number of official technical partners for the Dark Ice Project, an ambitious expedition involving UK polar explorers Alex Hibbert, George Bullard and James Wheeldon. The three explorers will embark on an unassisted six-month journey starting later this year, aiming to reach the geographical North Pole as the sun begins to rise at the end of the long Arctic winter in March 2021. They will travel first by boat, then ski for 70 days.

This project will involve exploring new territory and making fresh discoveries in environmental science, for example, in research to uncover how microplastics behave in the water, snow and ice. More is known about the surface of the moon than the Arctic Ocean in winter, yet it provides a key barometer to the health of our planet, the Woolmark Company has emphasised on making the announcement.

Other technical partners for the project include adidas Terrex, Gore-Tex and Amsterdam-based textile innovation studio

The Dark Ice Project will involve three explorers from the UK spending the whole of next winter on the ice of the Arctic Ocean, carrying out research as they go.

The Woolmark Company



Byborre. Within this network of partnerships, the Woolmark Company and Byborre have combined to develop a wool-rich baselayer and mid-layer system, using technical merino yarns from Südwole, providing next-to-skin comfort, breathability and protection from the elements.

New lease of life

Adidas introduced the Terrex brand in Europe as long ago as 2009, presenting itself as “the athletic brand in the outdoors”. It took the concept to North America in 2011 on the back of its acquisition of climbing footwear brand Five Ten. After some quiet years, it relaunched Terrex in 2014. It took until 2019 for it to unveil its first adidas Five Ten co-branded range of technical solutions for climbing. Perhaps it hopes the Dark Ice Project will give Terrex another new lease of life.

Stuart McCullough, managing director of the Woolmark Company, says: “The Dark Ice Project not only reinforces our commitment to championing innovation at the fibre, processing and garment stage, but also highlights our dedication to promoting best-practice to ensure minimal impact on the environment. We are proud to have partnered with this group of like-minded global leaders in performance and innovation, challenging and inspiring us in new ways.”

Testing and redesign

All of the kit the partners have prepared has already undergone months of intensive testing and redesign. The three expedition members have acknowledged that they will need to depend on the apparel they take with them to keep them warm, dry and mobile in temperatures below minus -50°C and in winds that will frequently reach hurricane force. All of them have previous experience of expeditions in Arctic winter conditions and will use their combined experience on the Dark Ice Project. They spent time on the ice this winter in preparation for the project, much of it in Canada’s Northwest Territories. They skied back into the territory’s capital, Yellowknife, in late January, with George Bullard saying: “We learned a lot about our kit and ourselves and we feel more ready than ever for the next step in our story.”

Clothes as the next interface

It is hard to imagine the polar explorers spending much time out of their merino-based baselayers and mid-layers over the weeks of the Dark Ice Project. Borre Akkersdijk, the designer who founded the Byborre studio, may not have found this to be an entirely new challenge. He has a particular



interest in how textiles and apparel will provide people in this decade with more than just protection. “Clothing is going to be the next interface,” he says, comparing the way we will use clothing in the near future with the way we have come to use mobile phones. Mobile phones, he points out, all look the same these days, more or less. What matters is what they do and allow us to do, not what they look like. Most of us can remember clearly when phones were only for calling someone or sending them a text message, and in those days, most people wanted a phone that looked different from everyone else’s. Now our phones do what we used to need alarm clocks, diaries, direction-aids, toys, televisions, radios, record-players, train tickets, bank cards and a hundred other things for. Their appearance matters not a jot.

Today, our clothes look different because practically all we need from them is to protect ourselves and express ourselves a tiny bit through fashion. When we all come to rely on our clothing to enhance our ability to perform, to help us in our daily life, Mr Akkersdijk says, the important things for everyone will be having the garments made from the yarns that best suit what we are doing in any given moment. “When clothing can do more than just protect you, you’re not going to wear all these different things all the time,” he explains. “You’re not going to keep 20 T-shirts in your closet just because they all look different. You are going to wear pieces that help you with your wellbeing, that help you get dry more quickly or that give you anti-microbial functionality. Your mobile phone is now your interface with the world. Clothing will be the next interface because it will help you with all the things you need to do.” 

Work at the Byborre studio, preparing for clothes to take over from mobile phones as the next interface between people and the world.

 Victoria Yanchuk/Byborre