Investigating Heat and Moisture Fluxes in High-Alpine Rock Walls Around the Jungfraujoch with a Wireless Sensor Field

Andreas Hasler, Stephan Gruber, Igor Talzi, Christian Tschudin & Daniel Vonder Mühll

Glaciology and Geomorphodynamics Group, Department of Geography, University of Zurich Switzerland.
Computer Science Department, University of Basel, Switzerland.
Contact: ahasler@geo.unizh.ch

Introduction

Warming and thawing permafrost in steep alpine bedrock can affect slope stability and complicate the operation of man-made infrastructure. Corresponding heat flux and phase change processes in porous fractured rock are currently poorly understood, especially their boundary conditions. In order to develop theoretical models for hazard assessment and the support of infrastructure maintenance, we need continuous and reliable measurements of physical parameters in natural and diverse areas. At present, limited measurement data exist for selected locations, but large measurement series do not exist which is in part due to the lack of inexpensive and suitable measurement systems.

Wireless Network for Environmental Sensors

The project PERMASENS aims at developing and demonstrating a flexible, distributed and self-organizing wireless network adapted to geophysical sensors. The first generation of such a sensor field will be installed in autumn 2006. It will monitor in near real-time the temperature as well as rock moisture content and gradients in the near surface layer. The PERMASENSE data chain consists of several wireless nodes to which multiple sensors are attached, a GPRS gateway node for data uplink as well as a database server with Internet connection and a web-based front-end for data retrieval and network monitoring (Fig. 3).

Physical Parameters and Construction of the Sensors

The sensors are mounted in a fiberglass rod and measure temperature and electrical conductivity between electrodes with high accuracy at four depths inside the 95cm deep drill hole. The direct current conductivity of the rock depends on its pore water content and the phase state of this water. The resistance of dry rock is magnitudes higher than the one of saturated but frozen rock and if this water thaws the resistance decreases again about two magnitudes.

Measurement electronics are kept inside the rod to minimize the effect of temperature fluctuations. As drilling effort should be minimized, the diameter of the drilling hole is 14mm so that the wiring and mounting of the electronics become a challenge.

Expected Results and Perspectives

The data generated with this first generation is expected to provide valuable insight into the advective component of the near-surface heat transfer as well as freeze-thaw processes. We plan to build a second generation of sensors for summer 2007 that can also measure crack dilatation, moisture/ice content and possibly acoustic events. This will introduce heat to great depths that quickly transfers to the rock mass and complicates the operation of man-made infrastructure. Beyond helping the modelling of permafrost processes, this network technology is also applicable to natural hazard surveillance. With better wireless sensor solutions, larger areas can be permanently monitored and linked to warning systems while maintenance cost is minimized because sensor status and battery voltage can be monitored from the office in near real-time. In high-mountain areas where field work is expensive and dependent on weather conditions this is a valuable asset.

In the hot and dry summer 2003, strong rock fall activity was observed between mid-June and August and attributed to permafrost thaw (Fig. 1). Thermal modelling confirmed deeper thaw than during previous decades (and possibly centuries, Fig. 2), however, the respective thaw depths were only reached in October or later, based on purely conductional heat transfer. This hints at advective heat transport in the fracture space that quickly transfers heat to great depths in the atmosphere and permafrost rock. Observations of strong water percolation into the tunnels of the Sphinx and the Aiguille du Midi for the first time during 2003 give further support to this hypothesis.

Wireless data transmission system as employed in PERMASENSE. Measurement data as well as sensor status reports will be available in the office in near-real-time.

Figure 3) Complete measurement and transmission system as employed in PERMASENSE. Measurement data as well as sensor status reports will be available in the office in near-real-time.

Figure 4) 14mm sensor rod with conductive foam electrodes. A thermometer on the reverse side measures temperatures.

Figure 5) Installation of sensorrod with setting tool and protection of the cables leading to the node. The sensor rod is inserted without glue into the clean hole and just sealed at the surface. The rod will be removable with the setting tool.

Figure 2) Modeled maximum annual active layer depth at one location between 1982 and 2003. Each line represents the progression of thaw and is then kept at the maximum value for the rest of the year. 1983-2002 are shown in black, 2003 in orange. Excess thaw during 2003 is clearly visible. However, previous depths are exceeded in October for the first time based on purely conductive model while most rock fall occurred in the period shown with the red square. This is a strong hint at the importance of advective heat transfer in frozen or thawing rock.

Figure 1) Rock fall at the Matterhorn (below the Carel hut) in summer 2003. The ice on the detachment surface is clearly visible. Photo: L. Trucco