



Back to [Death of backyard rinks linked to climate change](#)

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Shorter Canadian winters could well mean no more [Wayne Gretzkys](#), a scientific study reports Monday.

Five years of meticulous analysis by researchers at [McGill](#) and [Concordia](#) universities tracked evidence for the "significant shortening" of the outdoor skating season across Canada.

Fewer backyard rinks and less time on the ice means an attack on "a critical component of Canadian identity and culture," the study says.

"Wayne Gretzky learned to skate on a backyard skating rink."

Could hockey-mad Prime Minister Stephen Harper be persuaded of the dangers of climate change by the spectre of the end of backyard shinny?

"It's certainly a motivation for me in doing the study," study co-author [Dr. Damon Matthews](#), a Concordia professor in the Department of Geography, Planning and Environment, told the *Star*.

"Canada is lagging behind the rest of the world" in responding to climate change, he said.

"I'm hopeful this will resonate with Canadians."

The Conservative government [formally abandoned the Kyoto Protocol](#) for climate change in December.

The McGill-Concordia study is the first to connect the dots between warmer Canadian winters and evaporating outdoor rinks.

Based on the research, he said, it is possible to extrapolate that, "at current rates, within four decades there will be very little to no outdoor natural skating in Canada with the exception of Winnipeg."

Yes, Canadians can skate on indoor rinks or create artificial ice, he said. But flooding the backyard, as [Walter Gretzky](#) famously did for his prodigy son, will be impossible.

And with it could go the 10,000-hour rule, popularized by writer [Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*](#), that success is largely based on practising a skill over and over again.

"Hockey is the centre point of the culture," said Matthews. "And backyard hockey is the grassroots."

The elder Gretzky has said he built the outdoor rink in the backyard of his Brantford home for himself, more so than Wayne. In a 2010 speech he said he started out taking his son to outdoor rinks around the city.

But "Wayne would never ever want to come home. I was freezing. I couldn't sit in the car with it running, gas was 18 cents a gallon. That was a lot of money," Walter Gretzky told a conference sponsored by the Wayne Gretzky Foundation. "I told Mrs. Gretzky that I am going to build a rink in the backyard. He can go out and take as long as he wants.

"I'll be in the house where it's warm."

The study, published Monday by the [Institute of Physics Publishing](#), analyzed climate data from 1951 to 2005. Across Canada, winter temperatures have increased more than 2.5 C, more than three times the globally averaged warming, [Environment Canada reported in 2011](#).



Wayne Gretzky of the Brantford, Ont. team sits on the bench during action at the Quebec City Peewee hockey tournament in this Feb., 1974 file photo. The Great One learned to skate on outdoor rinks.

Canadian Press

Researchers plotted the length of the outdoor skating season each year, as declared by officials in communities across the country. The biggest change, Matthews said, has been in the Prairies and southwest Canada.

“As we continue emitting greenhouse gases, outdoor skating will be one of the casualties,” said Matthews.

“We are in the early days of the climate problem. All the evidence of climate change is there, there’s no reason to deny it.”

Still, spelling out a consequence such as no more pond hockey “does strike an emotional chord,” he said, that might be tuned just for Canadian ears.