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Outdoor ice hockey threatened by climate change: study

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Canada's favourite pastime is on its way to being an indoor-only sport in some areas of the country, a new study warns.

The study, released Monday by United Kingdom-based IOP Publishing, says outdoor ice hockey in Canada is being threatened by climate change.

Lawrence Mysak, co-author of the report and a professor at McGill University in Montreal, Que., said warmer winter temperatures caused by climate change is restricting the operation of ice rinks.

"We were able to see that in general, the rinks were being opened later and later over the last... 50 years, and secondly that the length of the season has also shortened by... one or two, sometimes three weeks," said Mysak from his office in Montreal last week.

Mysak fears the gradual warming of the earth caused by burning fossil fuels could eventually cause the beloved outdoor activity to perish in several decades.

"If we extend the trends into the future, there could be no outdoor skating rinks with global warming taking place," said Mysak, who grew up carving his skates into outdoor rinks in Edmonton, Alta.

Regions that are being hit the hardest are the Prairies, southeastern British Columbia and southern Ontario and Quebec. The Maritimes and northern parts of the country did not see significant changes, he said.

Using historical weather data from more than 140 weather stations across Canada since the 1950s, the researchers calculated the annual start date and length of the outdoor skating season, said Mysak.

He said the beginning of the season is considered the last of three days where the maximum temperature does not exceed -5 C, as it takes several cold days to lay the initial ice on the rink.

They then looked at how many days in January and February were cold enough to skate on backyard or community rinks built on the ground or snow, said Mysak.

Damon Matthews, co-author of the report and a professor at Concordia University in Montreal, Que., said many regions experienced decreases in the length of the outdoor skating season.

"It's hard to imagine parts of the country that currently do enjoy outdoor skating not being able to do that at some point in the future," said Matthews, adding the study is the first of its kind.

"Outdoor skating, particularly hockey, is synonymous with Canadian culture. I think there's big cultural ramifications to this as well."

But Justin Beaulieu of Lower Sackville, N.S., said losing outdoor skating rinks is a small casualty in the grand scheme of climate change.

"There's a lot more than skating that we have to worry about with climate change," said the 39-year-old who was enjoying his Sunday on the ice at an outdoor rink in Halifax, N.S.

"It's the big picture. We have a lot more to worry about."

In order to ensure Canada's future hockey stars will have access to backyard rinks, the country must tackle reducing greenhouse gases, the experts agree.



A new study, released Monday, March 5, 2012, by United Kingdom-based IOP Publishing says outdoor ice hockey in Canada is being threatened by climate change. In this picture, kids play hockey on an outdoor rink in Petite Riviere St-Francois in the Charlevoix region of Quebec on Friday, Feb. 10, 2012. (THE CANADIAN PRESS/Sean Kilpatrick)



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Since 1950, winter temperatures in Canada have increased by more than 2.5 C - three times the globally-averaged warming attributed to global warming caused by human activity, a news release from the publisher said.

Mysak said the study began as a 2011 thesis by McGill masters student Nikolay Damyanov.

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