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## Could hockey become an endangered sport?

By David Suzuki

One benefit of the National Hockey League strike: it gave people time to play outside on real ice! But outdoor skating could face the same difficulties as the NHL – a drastically shorter season or outright cancellation. Research from Montreal’s McGill and Concordia universities shows global warming is already having an effect on outdoor rinks in Canada.

“Many locations across the country have seen significant decreases in the length of the OSS [outdoor skating season], as measured by the number of cold winter days conducive to the creation of rink ice,” their study states. “This is particularly true across the Prairies, and in Southwest Canada, which showed the largest (and most statistically significant) decreases in the calculated OSS length between 1951 and 2005.”

This echoes a 2009 David Suzuki Foundation report, “On Thin Ice: Winter Sports and Climate Change”. The McGill investigation looks at constructed outdoor rinks while DSF’s focuses on frozen rivers, canals and lakes, but the conclusions are similar. Both predict that, unless we rein in greenhouse gas emissions, outdoor skating in parts of Canada could be history within the next 50 to 100 years (the McGill study’s authors now say it could happen within 20 to 30 years), and the length of the

outdoor skating season will continue to decline across the country. Meanwhile, at Ontario’s Wilfrid Laurier University, geographers have launched [www.RinkWatch.org](http://www.RinkWatch.org), a website where people can record information about backyard or neighbourhood rink conditions over the winter.

“Our hope is that Canadians from coast to coast will help us track changes in skating conditions, not just this year, but for many years to come,” associate professor Robert McLeman said in a release. “This data will help us determine the impact of climate change on winter in terms of length of season and average temperatures.”

According to the DSF report, one of Canada’s best-loved outdoor skating venues, Ottawa’s Rideau Canal, provides an example of what to expect. It concludes that, with current emissions trends, the canal’s skating season could shrink from the previous average of nine weeks to 6.5 weeks by 2020, less than six weeks by 2050 and just one week by the end of the century. In fact, two winters ago, the season lasted 7.5 weeks, and last year it was down to four. The canal had yet to fully open for skating when this column was written.

“On Thin Ice” notes that many of Canada’s hockey heroes got their start on outdoor rinks. “Without pond hockey, we probably wouldn’t have what has become the modern game of hockey,” the authors state. The DSF study says climate change could have a profound effect on many other winter sports, from skiing and snowboarding to winter mountaineering.

With food and water problems caused by more frequent droughts and floods, property losses and high infrastructure costs from rising sea levels, and increasing illness and death from extreme weather and pollution, hockey

may be the least of our worries. But losing winter recreation opportunities, let alone our ability to produce food and keep our homes warm and people healthy, needn’t happen. Solutions to our human-created problems exist. We just need our leaders to start taking this and other environmental issues seriously.

That’s not likely as long as we keep electing people who show more concern for the future of the fossil fuel industry than the citizens they are supposed to represent. Politicians who only look ahead three or four years – until the next election – aren’t seeing the big picture.

We need to consider every solution possible, now – from putting a price on emissions through carbon taxes and/or cap-and-trade to stopping the rapid exploitation of fossil fuels and switching to cleaner energy sources.

A skate or hockey game outside is a good place to start!

If you’re in Quebec City for Carnival, January 31 to February 3, join the David Suzuki Foundation for Sommet de l’hiver (Winter Summit) – four days of sports, culture and science, presented with Desjardins, to raise awareness about climate change and its effects on winter. When former hockey stars team up for an outdoor game against artists to help save winter sports, you may even see some NHL heroes.

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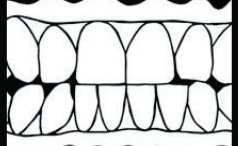
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