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Laurier researchers use backyard rinks to track climate change

Public invited to upload their own skating-rink data to website

WATERLOO – Generations of Canadians have grown up on backyard skating rinks, dreaming of becoming the next Wayne Gretzky or Joannie Rochette. But climate change appears to be threatening this time-honored Canadian tradition, and three Laurier researchers want to document what’s happening to our outdoor skating season.

Associate Professor Robert McLeman, Assistant Professor Colin Robertson and Master of Science student Haydn Lawrence from Laurier’s Department of Geography and Environmental Studies have launched www.RinkWatch.org, an easy-to-use website where “backyard skating meets environmental science.”

The researchers are inviting Canadians with a backyard or neighbourhood rink to report skating conditions over the winter to provide valuable data about the impact of climate change.

“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,” said McLeman. “This data will help us determine the impact of climate change on winter in terms of length of season and average temperatures. We want to see what is actually happening.”

Mittens and hats have been optional for many Canadians over the last few winters. The 2011-2012 winter was the third warmest on record, with national average temperatures 3.6 degrees Celsius above normal, according to an Environment Canada 2011 report. The warmest winter on record since nationwide records began in 1948 was in 2009-2010, with a national average temperature 4.1 degrees Celsius above normal.

More recently, Environment Canada chose unusually warm temperatures from coast to coast in 2012 as Canada’s top weather story of the year. Senior climatologist David Philips said the period between January and November was the fourth warmest on record since 1948.

The Laurier researchers hope that the backyard-rink concept will not only generate valuable data about Canadian climate change, but also raise awareness about its impact.

“The backyard rink is a Canadian tradition – one that future generations may not get to experience because of the damaging effects of climate change,” said McLeman, who has fond memories of past winters skating on backyard rinks and the Rideau Canal. “If we want to skate on backyard rinks in the future, we have to find out what is going on today.”

To become part of the cross-Canada study, Canadians with a backyard or neighbourhood rink can visit www.RinkWatch.org to create a profile and add the location and name of their rink, which will show up on a Google map. Registered users, whose identities remain private, are asked to return to the site once a week to check off which days they were able to skate. The website will track the results and compare conditions with other rinks across Canada. You can even post photos of your rink.