

Pond hockey a challenge this past winter

By Brian Lockhart

It may be time to get out the golf clubs, but for those who spend the winter season on the ice and take an interest in pond hockey and related on-ice adventures, researchers at Wilfrid Laurier University use a system to study weather through reports from outdoor rinks.

The University's Rinkwatch project, collects data from a network of outdoor rink-makers from across Canada and United States to study winter weather conditions and climate change.

From the data collected, it seems Canadians in the eastern part of the country didn't have much time on the ponds this year.

The study used real-time information through the winter reported by the 'Rink Sentinels' network.

The skating season in western Canada this year - especially in the northern Prairies, was long and cold.

In eastern Canada it took longer to get out on the ice. Ponds and outdoor rinks didn't freeze until mid January and many ponds used for playing hockey remained unsafe for skating for most of the winter.

'In many ways, this past winter was a microcosm of longer-term trends that seem to be emerging due to climate change,' said Robert McLeman, professor in Laurier's Department of Geography and Environmental Studies and Rinkwatch co-director. 'Locations that have traditionally had long, cold winters continue to have good skating seasons most years, but areas that have more variable winter conditions and average temperatures that hover closer to the freezing point - especially the lower Great Lakes region and the U.S. eastern seaboard - are seeing winters that are generally shorter and milder, and with more unpredictable and variable conditions. It makes rink-making a bigger challenge in those areas. Unfortunately, we expect to see this trend toward milder winters continue in coming decades.'

Backyard rinks in Michigan and New York recorded few than three weeks of good skating.

From southwestern Ontario to New Brunswick, rinks got going later than normal and were interrupted multiple times by late winter thaws.

Hockey players picked up some extra ice time with a cold spring that allowed for some late-season skating.

The RinkWatch program was launched in 2013 and relies on data submitted voluntarily from the public.

The Rink Sentinels network, which was piloted this past winter, provides an additional component. Sentinel rink-makers work actively with the project team to gather detailed, site-specific data every day, with a goal of collecting observations from the same locations year after year in order to systematically observe how weather trends affect the building and maintaining of skateable outdoor ice surfaces.