

North

## Should we blame the N.W.T.'s warm March on climate change? One researcher says yes




'Let's not look at this these things as isolated,' says hydrologist Bill Quinton

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Unseasonably warm weather turned sections of the Mackenzie Valley winter road into mud last week.  
(Submitted by Brandon Orlias)

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The unusually mild weather that melted Yellowknife's snow castle and closed winter roads this March should not be seen as just an isolated case of weird weather, says a researcher who has studied the North for decades.

Above-zero temperatures broke numerous weather records across the territory in mid-March, closed the Mackenzie Valley winter road due to deteriorating conditions, and forced two Yellowknife festivals that are usually held on the frozen Great Slave Lake to change their plans.

- [Yellowknife's Long John Jamboree moves to dry land due to warm weather](#)
- [Mackenzie Valley Winter Road closes amid mild temperatures](#)

Bill Quinton, a hydrologist and director of the Cold Regions Research Centre at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont., said this mild spell should not be seen as just an anomaly.

"You can have this type of thing in both a weather anomaly or climate change, but considering the context of all other things that are going on — considering, you know, what the mass of evidence that's indicating a warming climate — this is not inconsistent with that," he said in an interview Friday.

The centre has a base in Yellowknife, and Quinton has been working in the North since the late 1980s.



Dr. Bill Quinton, a hydrologist from Wilfrid Laurier University, says changes to the environment as a result of climate change are having an effect on food security, wildfires and infrastructure in the Northwest Territories. (CBC)

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# Should we be cautious about blaming everything on climate change?

Quinton said there is a risk associated with saying every unusual or unprecedented weather event is a sign of climate change. However, he said we should not rule out climate change as a factor.

"There are things that have happened in the past that in terms of the weather and climate that might not be a result of a warming trend, but what we've seen is consistent with warming," he said.

"So we have to be a bit careful with blaming everything on climate change, but we also have to be aware as well that this warming does involve greater variability, and this is part of that."



Snow turned into slush and puddles on Yellowknife streets, in this photo taken March 19. (Alex Brockman/CBC)

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# What does this unusual weather look like to someone who studies climate?

Quinton said what he sees in the recent mild spell is how it's reinforcing what northerners have told him about the impacts of the changing climate on their communities.

"There's some concerns with food security [because] as the land's changing, it can produce different types of vegetation and so on," he said.

"There's concerns about wildfires, their increasing frequency and magnitude. There's concerns about infrastructure in the towns and communities, and I guess this latest event is part of that — it's closing down ice roads, ice bridges, and there's economic impacts on communities."

- [Why a Yellowknife man created a Twitter bot that monitors temperature trends](#)

He said air temperatures in the Dehcho region, where he has worked in recent months, have been warming "pretty much consistently since the 1970s" and people are seeing other impacts of that trend.

"When you have ground thaw, you often have a change on the surface in terms of the type of vegetation that support it. So we're seeing some expansion of wetlands and the forests shrinking as a result," he said.

"What we're seeing this month is a result of a warming climate. It shouldn't really surprise us that we're seeing this and this is, you know, we're going to see this again going forward over the coming years."

## What's the ultimate takeaway here?

Quinton said his takeaway from this is not to treat unusual weather as one-off events.

"Let's not look at these things as isolated. It's part of a consistent story," he said.

"The question for us is, how do we adapt and how do we mitigate where possible, and how do we become better predictors of the impacts of these warming effects? And so that we can all

get on the same page and move forward with a minimum of impact on our communities and economy and environment."

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*Written by Donna Lee, based on an interview by Alyssa Mosher, produced by Gabriela Panza-Beltrandi*

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