

## Early Spring in Canada: A Blessing or a Bane?

- Dr. Jharna Chatterjee

According to Environment Canada, this last winter (around November 2009 to March 2010) has been the shortest and mildest on record. Most people, except winter-sports enthusiasts seem to be happy to find the roads and lawns snow-free at the end of March, instead of the usual end of April or early May.



(Photo taken by the author)

Maple branches are showing off promising reddish buds. The birds are happy: I see the doves gathering twigs to build their nests; I see the gorgeous Red Cardinal looking at me, expectantly, as if reminding me to put bird-seeds in the feeder, and I see flocks of black birds sitting on Maple branches singing a cheerful welcoming song. However, a news item on March 16 jolted me out of the "selfish" pleasure I felt at this early arrival of spring: *melting ice roads strand truck-drivers in northern Manitoba.*

More information about the emergency came from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC):



*Thick, wet mud prevented the semi from going any further, stranding the driver, RCMP said. (RCMP)*

"RCMP officers used a helicopter to rescue a truck driver stranded in northern Manitoba due to thawing winter roads. However, several other truckers are still stuck near the area of Wrong Lake." (CBC News).

Ummm, what is an ice road or a winter road? I ignorantly ask myself, red-faced even in my lonely home. After living in this country for forty-four years, I should have known. It was about time to find out!

"The lake [Wrong Lake – what a name!!], about 350 kilometres north of Winnipeg, is part of the province's 2,200-kilometre winter road system to northern and remote communities. The roads span frozen muskeg, lakes, rivers and creeks to temporarily connect those regions with the rest of the province [Manitoba]. Usually, the roads would be open for about eight weeks over the season, enabling trucks to bring in a year's worth of food, fuel and supplies. But this year the roads were open for less than a month. Mild weather delayed their start and a warmer-than-usual spring had deteriorated ice conditions." (CBC News)

This was, indeed, news to me. In addition to ordinary means and modes of transportation that all of us know about, such as railway tracks for trains, air traffic system for airplanes, seaways for ships and boats and steamers, highways for buses, cars and trucks, there are temporary ice roads for remote northern communities in Canada. During two months of real winter, almost the entire Canadian landscape freezes over and in Ottawa local people as well as tourists from all over North America enjoy the frozen Rideau Canal to skate on. During those two months, convoys of trucks haul all necessary commodities to northern communities for around thirty thousand people, over these ice roads: temporary transport system made of frozen water. Only fresh produce is flown by air and therefore, is quite expensive. Mostly Aboriginal tribes inhabit these remote, northern places. They would like to see some other types of roads built – something more permanent that will be available year-round. Undoubtedly, it will be expensive to build such a road system that is being considered but not yet planned.

I should add that sometimes unexpected mild weather comes in the middle of February too, spoiling the fun of Winterlude revelers in Ottawa. Winterlude is an annual festival which boasts hundreds of spectacular ice and snow sculptures, and people of all ages skating on the frozen Rideau Canal (said to be world's longest skating rink) and Dow's Lake from morning to evening. Beaver's tail or a deep-fried flat bread sweetened with the flavor of choice, is served at nearby take-out stalls to eager customers.



Rideau Canal during Winterlude

(National Capital Commission Ottawa website)

So, once again, Mother Nature reigns supreme, I was reminded. In Canada, as in the entire world, we the human beings may propose, but it is Mother Nature who has the final authority to dispose, and if we lose sight of this fact and show disrespect to her, we do so at our peril.