

Interview with James Sloan

Sport & Climate Impacts • January 2015

James Sloan is a lawyer in Albury, VIC, who spends much of his free time as avid cyclist, canoeist, runner and triathlete.

He has become involved with local environment and climate groups, and spoke about his experience to The Climate Institute as part of its [Sport & Climate Impacts: How much heat can sport handle?](#) report, released January 2015.



James Sloan running in the M2M from Marysville to Melbourne in April 2012. The event included a total of 35kms run, a 90km bike ride, and a 32km paddle.

Tell us about yourself in the context of sport, what competitions and/or sports you're involved in?

I have been involved in a variety of competitive sports at a relatively serious level for about 45 years. I started competitive kayaking in 1969, aged 12, and have stayed involved in the sport ever since. I was Australian junior sprint kayak champion until I turned 18, but found I was more suited to endurance events. I competed in the Murray River Marathon (400 km) 13 times, was member of the Australian Marathon kayaking team for the world championships five times, was chairperson of the Australian Canoe Federation for five years, a selector for five years and a team manager in 1996. Since then I have been involved in multisport events, including triathlon (Ironman), and running, road cycling and mountain biking.

I competed in the Tour de Timor six-day mountain bike race 2010 in 2011. I ran the Boston Marathon in 2013, the year of the bombs. I have attempted to paddle kayaks across Bass Strait in 2008 and 2014 (without success both times). I am 58 now and starting to slow down a bit although I still like to be involved in sport on a regular basis. I ride my pushbike to work and home each day which involves some fairly hilly bush trails, I run and paddle to 3 times a week and ride the road bike with friends twice a week. I am passionate about encouraging everyone to commute by non-motorised transport as much as they can.

When did you start thinking about the impacts of climate on sport?

An endurance sports person is always conscious about the impact of climate on what is fairly extreme physical activity.

Accordingly, we are very attuned to the environment conditions, which you have to be for your own safety. However, over the last 15 years it has become obvious that the summers have become hotter and there are many days where heading out on a long bike ride, or long run is not advisable.

Can you give an example or two of how climate has impacted a sport you're involved in over the years?

In 2003 I decided to do the Australian Ironman championships, which involves a 3.8 km swim, 180 km bike ride and 42 km run. That summer there were extensive bushfires in the Alpine area of Victoria and the Kosciusko National Park which burnt huge areas. The smoke from these fires spread all the way to Albury off and making it unsafe and unhealthy to go out and train in the environment. I spent a lot of time swimming (which still involve breathing smoke) as well as on the wind trainer inside to avoid these very smoky conditions.

The same year, the Alpine Audax bike ride at Bright around the Victorian Alps was cancelled because of the fire.

Because of shocking heatwave conditions in the Alpine Audax event held around the Australia Day weekend, since extreme weather in 2006 weather temperature got up to 47°C it has been necessary to introduce heat policy where the event will not proceed the forecast temperature Wangaratta is higher than 37°C. Previously was unusual to have those sorts of temperatures in the Alpine region but they are becoming more common.

The Murray River Marathon canoe race has been run from Yarrowonga to Swan Hill between Christmas and New Year for 45 years since 1969. For many years this was the most significant event on my sporting calendar and probably make me the endurance athlete that I became. However, because of increasing concerns about high bushfire risk in the Barmah Forest (which is on course), for the first time in 2014 the event has been moved to November. This has had a significant effect on the event because many people do not have the time available at that time of year to take a week off work whereas they usually have those holidays between Christmas and New Year. Although I do not wish it, I suspect this will lead to the eventual demise of an event that has been going for over 40 years.

What is most alarming to you personally?

Sport is important, but the consequences of climate change on sport is not necessarily the most alarming factor. I am far more concerned about the consequences on the planet as a whole, including the effect of droughts, storms, rising sea levels, heatwaves, habitat destruction, the major impact on poorer communities and vulnerable people. Sports are affected but the consequences for me personally it is the sort of world my children and grandchildren and future generations are to be left with.

What do you think is the way forward, in terms of the sustainability of sport at the local level in the context of wilder weather?

I think most sports will continue to be sustainable into the foreseeable future. However, there is going to be impact on people's ability to participate in sport at all levels because of the more severe consequences of climate change.

The sports people I know are pretty robust and can put up with some fairly tough conditions. They will continue to do so. I am more concerned about people who are not so adventurous deciding not to choose physical activity to get around on a daily basis. This will not only lead to deteriorating health consequences through lack of exercise, it will mean even more people driving cars and spending time in air-conditioned buildings and hence exacerbating the energy used problems we already have.

Obviously the solution to climate change is difficult and requires global cooperation on a huge scale. However, a wealthy country like Australia which is a huge per capita polluter should start by setting the example and taking all necessary steps to reduce our emissions. The now repealed carbon tax was a good start. The politics on this is difficult but the population needs to be aware that these are the steps we have to take if we are going to play our part in saving the planet.

We need to reduce our reliance on dirty energy and increase our research and development of renewable energy. We need to make sure we do everything to ensure we have a healthy planet.

A healthy and active population that uses non-motorised transport to get around on a daily basis is part of that mix. You don't have to be an extreme sport lover just to ride your bike to work, to school, when you are visiting friends or going to the shops. The more people doing this the better the environment will be and the better we feel about the planet and our place in it.

The full Sport & Climate Impacts report and associated content such as infographics can be found at www.climateinstitute.org.au/sport-and-climate.html