

2020 a tough year for turtles



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By Nate Smelle

Almost like clockwork, every year turtles emerge from their winter slumber in the spring; serve their ecosystem and all other species which depend on it by acting as caretakers of the water; return to their nesting site to deposit the next generation in the earth, so they may hatch before the cold autumn temperatures reset the cycle. Over the years, Kelly Wallace of Think Turtle Conservation Initiative has planned the organization's annual schedule of events to coincide with the seasonal fluctuations of this cycle to promote turtle awareness, and raise funds for a variety of turtle protection projects.

Heading into 2020, Wallace said she already had a full schedule of talks and events booked throughout Hastings County and beyond to continue with the group's efforts to educate the public about turtles, and raise funds for Project Safe Passage. Think Turtle initiated Project Safe Passage at the start of this year as a mitigation initiative to raise funds to help offset the costs of proven mitigation measures. The plan being to contribute data and donate funds towards efforts to address turtle road mortality hot spots along secondary roads in the Bancroft area that meet the criteria to act as a mitigation site.

Wallace said they were hoping for the opportunity to help address at the very least, one hot spot this year with mitigation measures being so costly, however they have had to adjust their goals and set their sights on 2021 because of COVID-19. On a positive note, she said there are currently two mitigation sites being developed along Hwy 62. In light of the measures imposed to prevent the

spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fact conservation was designated as 'non-essential' by the Ford government, she said they were forced to change their plans and cancel the public events they had planned.

'Overall, COVID-19 has caused challenges this year and we have not been able to connect with people in communities we very much wanted to and help the OTCC as much as we usually do by selling their merchandise at public events,' said Wallace. 'However we have been able to maintain our goal of helping people that want to help turtles, raising awareness and contributing to species recovery efforts.'

Acknowledging the importance of turtle conservation, and that it is not just about helping turtles, Wallace said their goal is 'to inspire people to connect with nature.' Faced with the changing reality of COVID-19, she said in order to continue protecting turtles they have had to adapt their approach to conservation in different ways this year.

'To do this, Think Turtle took a staying close to home approach this turtle season, and through social media and email encouraged people to do the same and connect with nature in their backyards, on their property and/or while on walks in close proximity to home,' explained Wallace.

Ultimately, Wallace said the theme Think Turtle focused on in 2020 was 'grassroots efforts.' Despite the tragic impact the pandemic has had on tens of millions of people worldwide, she said it has helped encourage more support for citizen-based conservation efforts by prompting more people to connect with nature.

For example, while the cancellation of the Bancroft Turtle Festival, which is typically scheduled just prior to the start of turtle nesting season to connect with adults and kids wanting to know more about how they can help turtles, was disappointing, Wallace said they came up with a new way for ecologically-concerned citizens to become engaged with turtle conservation. Recognizing that an important part of the festival each year is to secure much needed supply donations for the turtle hospital at the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre, she said they decided to host their first Super Glue Challenge online. Noting that Super Glue is used by the turtle hospital to treat shell injuries, Wallace said they were able to donate 72 bottles - 20 more than they did in 2019 from funds raised at the Bancroft Turtle Festival - through the online challenge.

Another bright light for Think Turtle in 2020, Wallace said, has been their enhanced nest protection efforts and the resulting hatchlings. To step up their campaign this year, she said Think Turtle engaged with the Town of Bancroft, Faraday Township, Tudor and Cashel Township, and the Municipality of and Hastings Highlands to request permission to pursue nest protection to different degrees in each community. Thankfully, Wallace said they were given permission to protect nests in each community where they had confirmed sightings. Using low profile nest protectors and/or wood-frame nest protectors with the help of an 'absolutely amazing' team of volunteers, Wallace said they were able to monitor several nesting sites in the area. As a result of their hard work, she said they helped ensure that more than 600 turtle hatchlings survived the dangerous nesting season. Since some of the nest sites were in locations that have been predated routinely every year, she said this was the first time in decades - according to some local residents - where species recovery has occurred in these areas.

'It has been a joy seeing the reactions of adults and kids seeing nests hatch out for the first time and being involved with the turtle releases,' Wallace said. 'This endeavour has been a real community effort that all those involved should be very proud.' Looking back on what made the 2020 turtle season so unique, Wallace acknowledged that the pause in human activity because of the pandemic has had both a positive and negative effect on turtle populations. While many people seemed to be under the impression that turtles would have a better year because of the reduced number of vehicles on the road, she said that was not the case. In fact, Wallace said the number of turtles struck by motor vehicles surpassed the total number of injured or killed turtles in 2019. She said that the reduction in traffic also caused an increase of incidents of nest predation, because the 'quiet created the opportunity for predators to scavenge the road shoulders more than they may have in the past because of vehicles on the road.'

Explaining some of the challenges faced by turtles in 2020 in greater detail, Wallace said 'People frustrated at their usual forms of entertainment not being available, the infection control restrictions in place, and/or generally frustrated by COVID-19 took their anger out on turtles being easy targets on the road. Deliberate strikes increased. Less people out and about made it easier for them to

not be reported. With waterways being quieter this caused turtles especially noted snapping turtle to venture further into and hang around aquatic corridors they would normally be more inclined to give a wide berth? With COVID-19 being first and foremost in peoples minds it was difficult to get the number of volunteers and monitors needed to help with conservation efforts. We are of course so thankful for the help we received.?

According to Wallace, the provincial government also put turtles in jeopardy this year by using COVID-19 to further strip down species at risk legislation already in place to protect turtles and other endangered species. With the passing of the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act, 2020 (Bill 197), she said ?it was made abundantly clear that protection once available to turtles, other vulnerable species and their habitat via provincial agencies is truly a thing of the past.?

She continued, ?The Progressive Conservative government's plan to fast track environmental assessments was strengthened by COVID-19 to pursue development and projects that have been kept at bay because of species at risk and environmental concerns. Moving forward it is now more important then ever for concerned citizens, townships and municipalities throughout Ontario to engage in community conservation efforts to protect localized biodiversity, natural habitat and in doing so the complex relationships that contribute to healthy productive ecosystems that we depend on and benefit from.?

When it comes to protecting turtles and the environment, Wallace said that a good way to accomplish both is by protecting wetlands. While pointing out how wetlands provide crucial habitat for turtles and other wildlife, plants, and microorganisms, she explained how they also serve humans at the same time by: regulating the climate; reducing the impacts of flooding by absorbing heavy rain and releasing water gradually; and, providing clean air and water that all species need to survive.

Providing insight into the vast array of ecosystem services wetlands deliver, Wallace said ?Wetlands help stabilize shorelines and riverbanks. Many wetland plants have specific environmental needs and are extremely vulnerable to change. Some of our endangered plant species depend totally on wetlands. The Wetlands facilitate ecosystems that are paramount to our well being by way of the services they provide and we very depend on and benefit from. The loss of any species can impact an ecosystem's ability to function and continue to provide us with services that support our cultures and economies.?

To help protect wetlands, Wallace said Think Turtle plans to continue educating the public about the immense value of these ecosystems. Indicating that turtle season is not yet finished, Wallace said drivers need to keep an eye out for turtles and turtle hatchlings on the roads.

?None of us wants to be the cause of a turtle getting injured or dying because we were in a hurry to get somewhere or on the phone or texting,? she said. ?We care about wildlife so drive safe, responsibly and mindful of potential wildlife encounters while driving. Enlist your passengers help to actively watch for wildlife - on the road, in the ditch, on the shoulder, and in the right of way. The presence of wildlife is part of what makes Ontario a wonderful place to call home and visit. Through no fault of their own we share the roads with wildlife, big and small. They have been given no choice but to cross the roads with such a vast network of roads that either run adjacent to their habitat or intersect it. Please be mindful of the turtles and other wildlife we share the roads with. Help prevent wildlife road mortality!?

To report an injured or deceased turtle, she advises people to call the Ontario Conservation Centre: at 705-741-5000. For those unable to drive the turtle to the OTCC, she said a ride can be arranged through their Turtle Taxi volunteers.