

ONTARIO'S TURTLE FAMILIES AND SPECIES AT RISK

CHAPTER 3

"Good morning Tota Ma," said Wari and Sewatis, as they bounced into the brightly lit kitchen for breakfast.

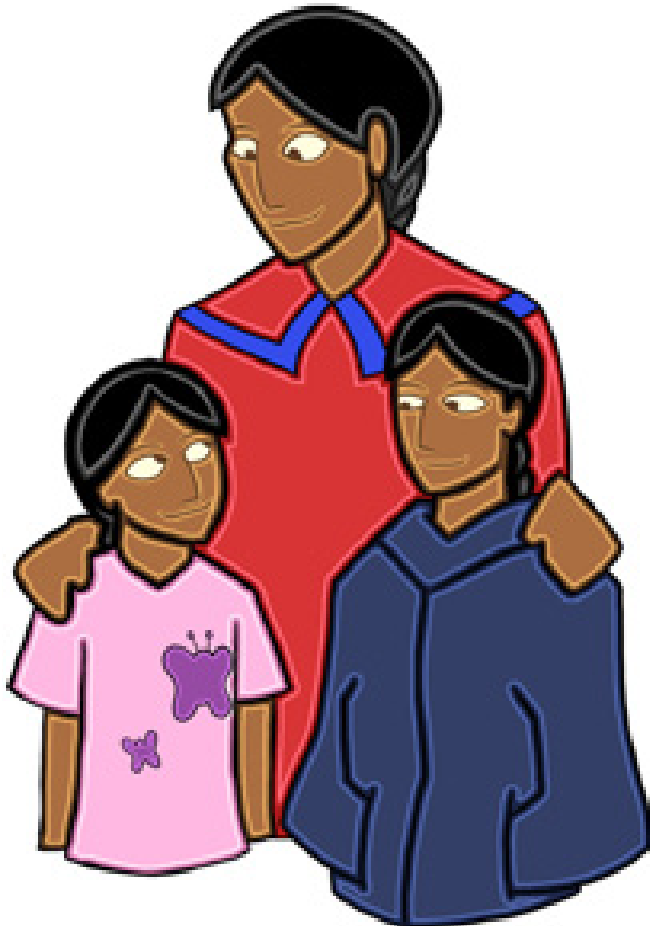
"Good morning my children! Did you sleep well?" Tota Ma asked. Sewatis gave his Tota a big hug and pulled out a chair to sit beside her while Wari sat down across from them.

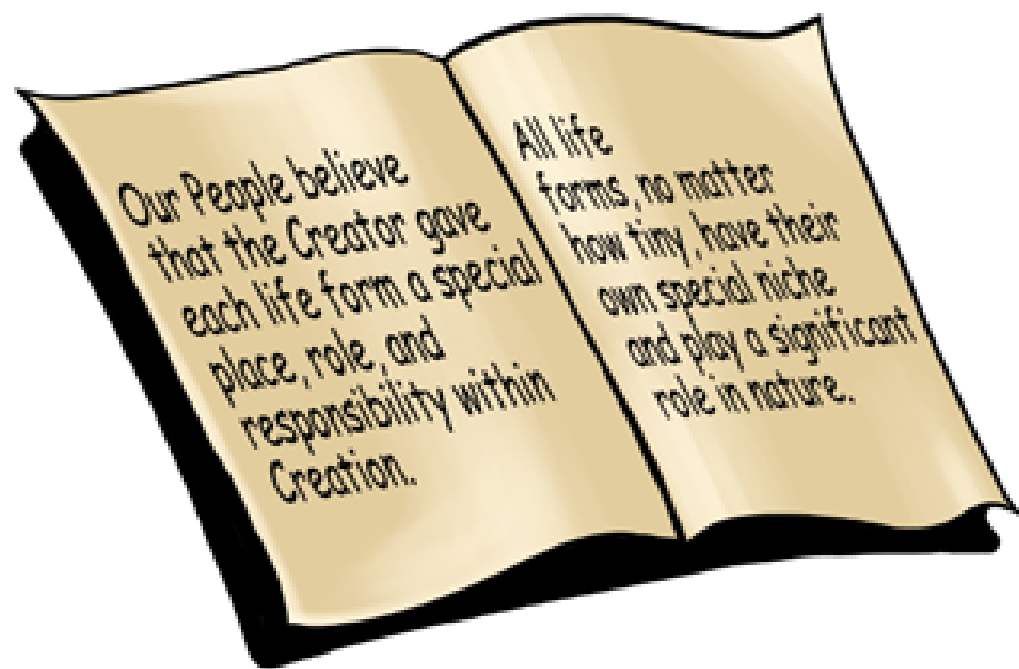
"What are you working on today?" he asked. Tota Ma was sitting at the kitchen table with her journal, a turtle poster, and a few pamphlets beside her cup of tea.

"Here children, take a look at this poster from the Toronto Zoo. It shows Ontario's turtle species and it is in our language. Can you recognize any of the turtles in the poster? I thought about what A'nó:wara said to me and I wondered about the turtle species that are disappearing," Tota Ma explained to her grandchildren.

"Oh Tota! I have seen turtles like A'nó:wara on the edge of the road down south," Wari added, looking at her Tota Ma with a smile. "Mom said that they were trying to lay their eggs. I always wondered why they wanted to put their eggs along a road instead of someplace safer. I do not remember seeing any other types though" Wari said as she pointed to the Map turtle on the poster.

Tota Ma followed Wari's gaze. "Hmm, I remember seeing some of them when I was young. We used to go down to the big marsh and the other wet places in the spring to pick medicine plants. In the fall, we dug roots there as well. For many years, Uncle Buddy trapped muskrat and beaver in the big marsh with his grandfather. They knew almost every trail and waterway through the cattails. I think that he knows about some of the other turtle species that lived around here. We will have to go and talk to him about A'nó:wara. I remember Uncle Buddy saying that he knows when it is time to prepare for hunting season when he does not see A'nó:wara basking in the sun. This is because A'nó:wara is one of the first creatures to dig down into the mud at the bottom of the ponds and creeks to begin its winter sleep."





Tota Ma looked over at the poster Wari was holding, “Now that I think about it, I have not seen the pretty little turtle with the stars on its back for a long time. There are turtles in the big marsh, out by the bay. I can remember seeing them lay their eggs in the soft gravel near the edge of the marsh, just at the beginning of *Ohyariha*.” The children continued looking at the turtle posters, wondering what turtle eggs looked like.

“Tota, this poster says that seven turtle species are at risk. What does that mean?” asked Wari.

“I wondered about that as well. Here are some pamphlets that talk about Species at Risk. I was reading them and thinking about what it means to be at risk or threatened. I wrote some ideas down in my

journal. Do you want to hear them?” the grandmother asked. The children nodded their heads.

“There is supposed to be room for everyone and everything. That is biodiversity. Turtle history is a part of our history. If a life form disappears, the entire community suffers and it will never be the same again,” explained Tota Ma.

She continued speaking, “You know, my grandchildren, my Auntie Sadie once told me that no life form is able to change its habitat at will. Changes within a community happen, but they take place over long periods of time so the life forms can adapt. That means we cannot move an animal or plant to someplace new and expect it to survive.

All life forms are interdependent. That means that everything is connected together. After thousands of years of watching, listening, and thinking about the world around us, we *Onkwehono* have come to understand that some life forms are flexible within their own habitat and are able to adapt to changes. However, other life forms are very limited in their ability to change or adapt.” Tota Ma finished her thought and then paused for a moment.

“Wait Tota,” said Sewatis, “I noticed something interesting the other day while walking to the pond. The milkweed plants caught my eye and I noticed that all around them were beautiful orange butterflies! Are butterflies connected to everything?” he asked.

“Yes,” answered Tota Ma. “Sewatis, do you remember last summer when we found that pretty monarch butterfly? It is a life form with a very limited ability to change. The young monarch only eats milkweed leaves, so if these plants are sprayed with pesticides, there will be no food for the young monarchs. This butterfly goes all the way to Mexico in the fall because it cannot survive Canadian winters with the ice and snow.”

“It sure is cold here in the winter,” said Wari with a shiver, “good thing I have my winter coat—but butterflies do not have winter coats!”

“Imagine that! A winter with no coat? They would have no way to keep warm and nothing to eat! Snow covers everything in the winter,” agreed Sewatis.

Tota Ma nodded in agreement and sipped her tea. She thoughtfully continued, “As they travel south, the monarchs only sleep in oyamel trees, which look like our spruce trees. However, these trees are being cut down for wood and soon there may be no place for monarchs to spend their winters. There may come a time when those beautiful butterflies do not dance in our fields.” Wari’s eyes filled with tears thinking about the loss of butterflies. She treasured a pair of beautiful butterfly earrings she was given as a little girl from her Tota Ma. This gift sparked Wari’s love for butterflies.

Sewatis understood his sister’s feelings and wondered, “How do other plants and animals survive in the winter, Tota?”

“Some plants and animals can adjust to seasonal weather changes, like our brothers the deer who are able to grow an extra coat of fur for the winter,” explained Tota Ma. “Others must move away, like the geese and ducks in the fall, or leave behind a seed for next season, just as some plants do.”

Tota Ma continued, “Many animals, plants, and elements are under stress. Life forms at risk are referred to as Species at Risk. It is good that science acknowledges how fragile our ecosystems are.



First Nations people have had this understanding for thousands of years. This is a reason why we are asked to be respectful of other life forms." Tota Ma sipped her tea and looked at Wari as her granddaughter opened the Toronto Zoo's Species at Risk pamphlet on the table.

"Here Tota, take a look at this pamphlet. Many of the Species at Risk in Canada are found around bodies of water, but over seventy percent of the wetlands in our Great Lakes watershed have been drained! Many of our fish used for food begin as eggs in a wetland. Wetlands are a great nursery area. There are many birds, mammals, and reptiles that are dependent on these watersheds in Ontario. Wow! We all need to worry about the loss of wetland habitat. I never realized how important wetlands were to everyone" said Wari with concern.

"When you think about it," said Tota Ma, "wetlands are important for our health and wellness too. This is true because many of our medicine plants grow around wetlands. My *Akoso'tha* spent a lot of time harvesting healing plants from the marsh near our home. I still go there when I need to make tea

for medicine. These plants depend on the animals in the wetlands to help them grow and stay healthy."

Sewatis and Wari continued listening to their Tota as they looked out onto the glistening water. They wondered where they might find medicine plants around the lake. Sewatis filled his glass with more cranberry juice and continued listening to Tota Ma.

"Our turtle brothers and sisters who are identified as Species at Risk tell us that our wetland communities are also at risk. We understand turtles are near the top of the food chain within the wetland. The Map turtle you saw on the poster Wari, is listed as a Species at Risk. This turtle, like others, has a role and responsibility within the wetland to keep the water clean. They do this by looking after animals that have died and by eating some of the insects that grow and reproduce in the wetland. When I see turtle species on a poster like this from the Toronto Zoo, it makes me sad. It is not just turtles who are at risk, but it is the



entire community. Animals, like our First Nations communities, all depend upon one another," said Tota Ma.

Sewatis sat very quietly, thinking about his Tota's reflection. "What is *A'nó:wara's* next challenge for us then?" he asked.

Tota Ma reflected on *A'nó:wara's* words, as she recalled the third challenge from her dream: "*Who are the turtles in Ontario and what do they look like? Where can you find them? Why are turtle families on the Species at Risk list?*"

Wari and Sewatis jumped excitedly out of their chairs as their Tota repeated *A'nó:wara's* words.

"Tota, it is not only turtles that are important. We must find out about water, wetlands, communities, and more if we want to have a good understanding of how we are all connected. This is going to be a big challenge!" exclaimed Sewatis with a smile.

Tota Ma gave Sewatis a big hug. "You are right, my boy! I am so glad that you are here to help us. Now I understand why *A'nó:wara* has come to see me. There is a lot of work to be done!"



NEIGHBOURS AND FRIENDS

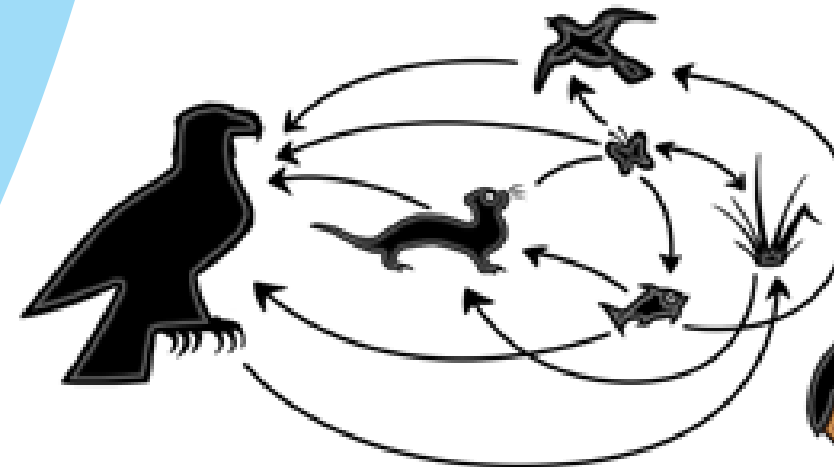
CHAPTER 4

After a morning spent with Tota Ma, Wari and Sewatis went outside for a bike ride to the water's edge with Sose. It was a hot day and perfect for a swim! They brought a delicious picnic lunch of fry fish and corn bread. Once they were down at the water, Sose unpacked the lunch and they enjoyed their meal. After a quick swim, the children packed up and headed back to Tota Ma's house. Once at home, the children began asking Tota Ma more questions about *A'nó:wara* and the challenges. The children were excited about the *fourth challenge*, to discover *A'nó:wara's friends and neighbours in the wetlands and how are they related.*

"Tota, there are so many different animals and plants in the world. How does anyone understand all the relationships in a wetland?" asked Wari.

Tota Ma replied, "There are many animals that are a part of the web of life that support *A'nó:wara*. I remember my *Akoso'tha* and Auntie Sadie explaining the many ways things are connected when they would sit together to sew or bead. They would say that every life form, no matter how small or large, has needs for food, water, shelter, and space. All things exist within a web of interdependence. If the web is damaged or changed, all life forms will be affected." Tota Ma enjoyed explaining these relationships to her grandchildren, just like her *Akoso'tha* explained to her long ago.

The grandchildren continued listening with interest. "Living within this web over thousands of generations, First Nations people have come to understand some of the delicate relationships that are necessary for life to continue in balance. Before European contact, the people of this territory learned how to live in peace with one another. The Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people practiced mutual peace based on respect, reciprocity, relationship, and responsibility. Our Haudenosaunee ancestors called this treaty, "The Dish with One Spoon." The 'dish' represented the



shared hunting territories of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee in the region of Southern Ontario. The Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe both realized that their territories overlapped and they had to share caretaking responsibilities for the land. Through this understanding, the two communities were able to co-exist and live sustainably with the earth and one another." The grandchildren were excited to learn about their culture from their Tota.

Tota Ma continued, "This is all part of our Traditional Knowledge passed down from one generation to the next. Giving thanks for knowledge is important. We give thanks to the sun and understand that the sun provides energy which all life forms need, either directly or indirectly. Photosynthesis is an example of the direct relationship between the sun and plants. We understand that some animals and birds get their energy from the sun, by eating plants. These animals are called herbivores."

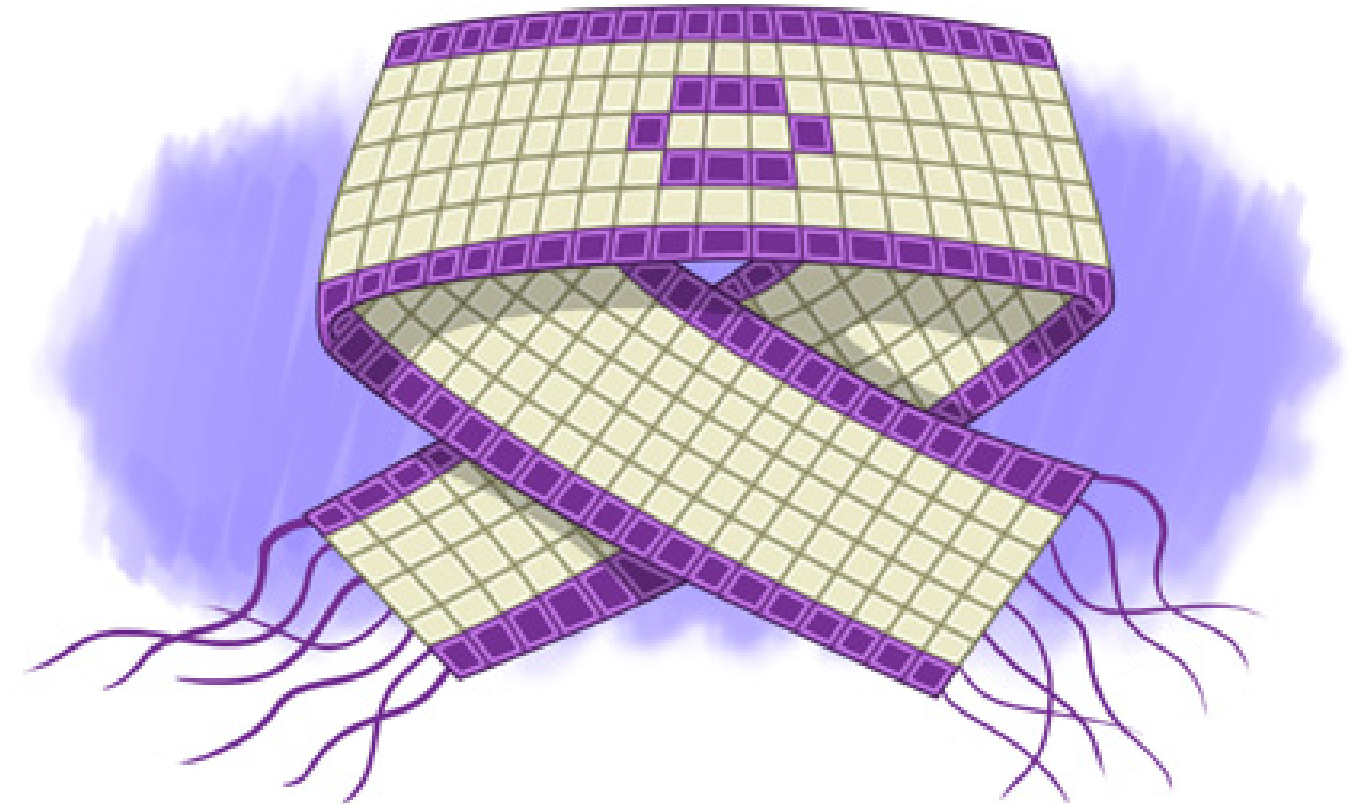
"I knew that already," exclaimed Sewatis. "I learned about that in my science class!"

Tota Ma continued speaking. "Some animals get their energy by eating other animals. What are these called, Wari?"

"That is a carnivore," she answered. "Omnivores eat both plants and animals to get their energy," she said proudly.

"Good job, my girl!" exclaimed her Tota. "The relationships between animals are similar to the relationships between First Nations clans. We understand that our clans have interconnected responsibilities. We must acknowledge that our First Nations communities function best when clans work together for the health of all. These understandings are thousands of years old and they are very important to Our People," Tota Ma explained. The children stretched their legs listening to their Tota speak. This made them think about their own clans.

Tota continued, "the *Kanyen'kehaka* Nation is divided into clan groupings. *Kanyen'kehaka* clans are inherited through their mother's blood lines. Traditionally, these clans had special characteristics and responsibilities within the community. Clans also served as a system of traditional government. There are three clans comprised of turtle, wolf and bear.



Sewatis asked his Tota what else she knew about the *Kanyen'kehaka* clan system. Tota answered Sewatis with enthusiasm, "Clans sit together in the longhouse for ceremony. *Rotinonhsyonni* clans are inherited from their mother, which is different from the Anishinaabe people who follow their father's clan."

These clan teachings helped Wari and Sewatis understand their connection to Tyendinaga and to family members they had outside of the community! The children understood the importance of strong family ties. It was also exciting to learn that clan members are not always blood related and that one can meet new clan members in all sorts of places, even in the city.

The summer had come to an end and Tota Ma was going to miss her grandchildren when they went back to school. However, Tota Ma had faith that Wari and Sewatis were leaving with information that they would share with their classmates and friends. They had made so many plans to help *A'no:wara*. Tota Ma could hardly wait for them to come back and visit over their winter break to continue their work!

