



# ONTARIO'S TURTLE FAMILIES AND SPECIES AT RISK

## CHAPTER 3 - EKO-NSING GINJIGAN

"Good morning Nokomis," said Noodin and Ziigwan, as they bounced into the brightly lit kitchen for breakfast.

"Good morning my children! Did you sleep well?" their Nokomis asked.

With a big smile Noodin gave his Nokomis a big hug and pulled out a chair to sit beside her while Ziigwan sat down across from them. "What are you working on today?" he asked. Nokomis Annie was sitting at the kitchen table with her journal, a poster decorated with turtles, and a few pamphlets beside her cup of tea.

"Here children, take a look at this poster from the Toronto Zoo. It shows turtles and it is in our language. Can you recognize any of the turtles in the poster? I thought about what *Miskwaadesi* said to me and I wondered about the turtles that are disappearing," Nokomis Annie said to her grandchildren.

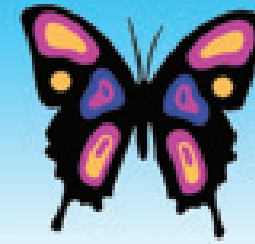
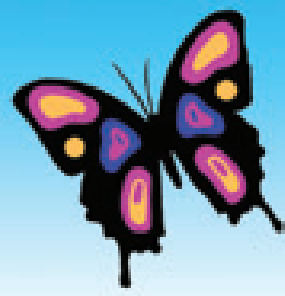
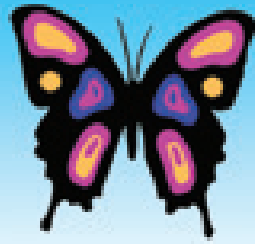
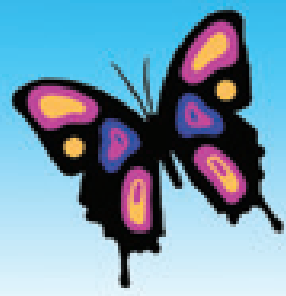
"Oh Nokomis, look! There is *Miskwaadesi*. I saw that beautiful turtle here last summer when we were

playing down by the creek," Noodin said excitedly. "I like that it is called the turtle that carries the sunset on its back. It sure does have a lot of red, orange, and yellow on its shell and I like the stripes on its neck and feet!" he exclaimed.

Ziigwan jumped in, "Those turtles like to sit on the big logs which stick out of *nibi*." Nokomis Annie nodded her head in agreement.

Looking at the poster Noodin added, "I have seen snapping turtles on the edge of the road. 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."

Nokomis Annie smiled at Noodin and said, "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 summer to pick medicine plants. In the fall, we dug roots there as well. For many years, Uncle Buddy trapped *zhashkoonh* and *amik* 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. He always talked about a turtle that carried a map on its back. We will have to go and talk to him about *Miskwaadesi*. I remember Uncle Buddy saying that he knows when it is time to prepare for hunting season when he no longer sees *Miskwaadesi* basking in the sun. This is because *Miskwaadesi* is one of the first turtles to dig down into the mud at the bottom of the ponds to begin its winter sleep."

Nokomis Annie looked over at the poster Noodin 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. They used to be in the big marsh, out by the bay. I remember them laying their eggs in the soft gravel near the edge of the marsh, just at the beginning of *Odemiin Giizis*." The children continued looking at the turtle posters, wondering what turtle eggs looked like.

"Nokomis, this poster says that seven turtle species in Ontario are at risk. What does that mean?" asked Noodin.

"Here are some pamphlets that talk about Species at Risk" said Nokomis Annie. "I was reading them and thinking about what it means to be at risk or threatened. I wrote down some ideas in my journal. Do you want to hear them?" The children nodded their heads with excitement.

"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 Nokomis Annie.

She continued speaking, "You know, my grandchildren, my Auntie Sadie once told me that no

life form is able to change the place where it lives, 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. After thousands of years of watching, listening, and thinking about the world around us, we *Anishinaabeg* have come to an understanding that all life forms are interdependent. That means that everything is connected together." Nokomis Annie finished her thought and then paused for a moment.

"Wait Nokomis," said Ziigwan. "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?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Nokomis Annie. "Ziigwan, do you remember last summer when we found that pretty monarch butterfly? 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."

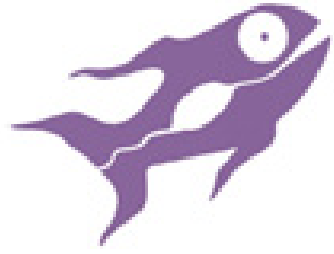
"It sure is cold here in the winter," Noodin said to Ziigwan. "Good thing I have my winter coat. But butterflies do not have coats!"

"Imagine that! A winter without a coat? They would have no way to keep warm and nothing to eat! *Zoogpo* covers everything in the winter," agreed Ziigwan.

Nokomis Annie nodded in agreement and sipped her tea. She thoughtfully continued, "As they travel south, the monarch sleeps in oyamel *mitigook*, which look like our spruce *mitigook*. However, these *mitigook* 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." Ziigwan's eyes quickly 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 Nokomis Annie. This gift sparked Ziigwan's love for butterflies.

Noodin understood his sister's feelings and wondered, "How do other plants and animals survive in the winter, Nokomis?"





"Some plants and animals can adjust to seasonal weather changes. Our brothers the deer, grow an extra coat of fur for the winter," explained Nokomis Annie. "Some, like bears, find shelter underground in caves. Others must move away, like geese and ducks in the fall, or leave behind a seed for next season, just as some plants do."

Nokomis continued, "Many animals, plants, and elements are under stress or 'at risk.' It is important that science acknowledges how fragile our ecosystems are. First Nations people have understood this for thousands of years, or as some say, 'since the beginning of time.' This is why we are asked to be respectful of other life forms." Nokomis Annie sipped her tea. Ziigwan opened the Toronto Zoo's Species at Risk pamphlet on the table.

"Nokomis, listen to this! Many of the Species at Risk in Canada are found around bodies of *nibi*. The pamphlet says over seventy percent of the wetlands in our Great Lakes watershed have been drained, yet many of our fish used for food begin as eggs in a wetland. Wow! Wetlands are a great place to grow! We all need to worry about the loss of wetland habitat. I never realized how many plants and animals are dependent on our *nibi*," said Ziigwan. Noodin shook his head in agreement with his sister.

"When you think about it," said Nokomis Annie, "our wetlands are important for our health and wellness too. This is true because they clean our water and many of our medicine plants grow around wetlands. My *Okomisan* spent a lot of time harvesting healing plants from the marsh near our home. I still go there when I need to make medicinal teas. There are



many medicine plants that depend on *amik* to create wetlands to help them grow and stay healthy."

Noodin and Ziigwan continued listening to their Nokomis. They wondered where they might find medicine plants around the lake.

"Our turtle brothers and sisters tell us that wetland communities are also at risk. Turtles have the role and responsibility in wetlands to keep *nibi* clean. They do this by looking after animals that die 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 wetland community. Animals, like our First Nation communities, all depend upon one another," said Nokomis Annie.

Noodin sat very quietly, thinking about his grandmother's words, "What is *Miskwaadesi's* next challenge for us?" he asked.

Nokomis Annie reflected on *Miskwaadesi'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?"

Noodin and Ziigwan excitedly jumped up out of their chairs as their grandmother repeated *Miskwaadesi's* words.

"Nokomis, it is not only turtles that are important. We will have to find out about *nibi*, wetlands, communities, and more if we are to have a good understanding of how we are all connected. This is going to be a big challenge!" exclaimed Noodin with a smile.

Nokomis Annie gave her grandson a big hug. "You are right, my boy! I am so glad that you are here to help us. Now I understand why *Miskwaadesi* has come to see me. There is a lot of work to be done!"

