



HEALTHY HABITATS

CHAPTER 5

During a visit to the marsh, Tota Ma stopped to observe changes in the season. She placed an offering of *oyen'kwa'on:we* at the edge of the water, sat down on her favourite rock, and closed her eyes while she focused on the sounds of the community. When Tota Ma first sat down, there were few sounds coming from the marsh. After she had settled down on that old *raksotha*, the Grandfather rock, the animals went back to their work and she heard their sounds again.

Tota Ma remembered when she was a little girl, helping her grandfather catch minnows in the marsh down the road from her house. There were many things to look at and listen to down at the water such as birds singing and frogs croaking. It was a place full of life! Her grandfather talked to her about the marsh and the wonderful gifts it had to offer. He talked about how much it was needed, mosquitoes and all! Tota Ma's grandfather told her that all living things have four basic needs—food, water, shelter, and space. However, the food must be nutritious

and healthy, the water drinkable and clean, and the shelter must protect creatures from weather and predators. He also explained that shelter includes a place to be cared for. Shelter is more than a house, it is a home! Every plant and animal needs enough space to find food, water, and shelter. These needs create the niche which each living thing requires.

Tota Ma's grandfather shared the understanding of Creation that each plant and animal on *Yethinihstenha Ohwentsya*, Our Mother Earth, has its own special place. Tota Ma thought about her needs and realized that humans depend upon every other member of Creation, because they were the last created.

The sun was warm on Tota Ma's back and she was starting to nod off when she sensed something watching her. She opened one eye slowly and there at her feet sat *A'nó:wara*! The old turtle's shell was wet and sparkling in the afternoon sun.

"She:kon Tota, it is good to see you today. I was hoping that you would come by," said *A'nó:wara* happily.

Tota Ma told *A'nó:wara* that she was grateful for all of the sights and sounds of life in the wetland. *A'nó:wara* nodded her ancient head slowly in agreement.

The old turtle spoke again in her quiet voice, *"It is your responsibility to be thankful for the gifts that*



grateful and thankful for the many gifts they had been blessed with. The Creator looked down upon all of Creation and was very upset that the only members of Creation who had free will were not showing gratitude. The Creator threatened to destroy *Yethinihstenha Ohwentsya* and everything on it. *Etshitewatsi'a Karahkwa*, Our Elder Brother, understood the Creator's thoughts and spoke up in defence of humans who were young and weak. *Etshitewatsi'a Karahkwa* asked that humans be given another chance. The Creator sent *Etshitewatsi'a Karahkwa* to fly over all of Creation, from east to west, looking for a lodge where humans were showing thanks and gratitude. The Creator promised to spare Creation if good news was brought back.

At dawn the next day, *Etshitewatsi'a Karahkwa* set out on his journey across Turtle Island, flying from east to west, searching for signs of thanks. At the very last village, in a tiny lodge at the end of the trail, *Etshitewatsi'a Karahkwa* saw a thin plume of smoke rising up to the sky. The smoke was from the *oyen'kwa'on:we* which an old *akoksten'a* and *roksten'a* placed on their morning fire. The elderly couple was offering words of thanksgiving, speaking to all the different plants, animals, elements, and helpers that surrounded them. *Etshitewatsi'a Karahkwa* flew back to the Sky-world to report to the Creator that he had found one couple who remembered to be grateful. The Creator was pleased and promised to spare Creation as long as there was evidence of thanks and gratitude." *A'no:wara* took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

have been given to you. That reminds me of a very old teaching from long ago. After the Creator had thought everything into existence and placed all the elements, plants, and animals on *Yethinihstenha Ohwentsya*, the Creator gave each their responsibilities. Then, when everything was ready, the Creator created humans," said *A'no:wara*.

"My turtle ancestors shared this teaching with me. They talked about how much humans depended on us. We, the older brothers and sisters of Creation, were given the responsibility to provide humans with food and to make sure that water stayed clean and healthy. Humans are the only members of Creation who were given free will," explained the old turtle. *A'no:wara* paused briefly to observe a beautiful dragonfly zip across the pond.

"All that the Creator asked of you, the youngest of Creation, was that you show gratitude and give thanks for the other members of Creation who so readily shared themselves with you. Those first humans agreed and showed their gratitude every morning by offering their *oyen'kwa'on:we*, and thanksgiving to the Creator," explained *A'no:wara*.

The old turtle continued, "As time went by, the humans became forgetful. They were so busy enjoying the gifts of Creation that they forgot to be



Tota Ma remembered the story and thanked A'no:wara for bringing it back to her memory.

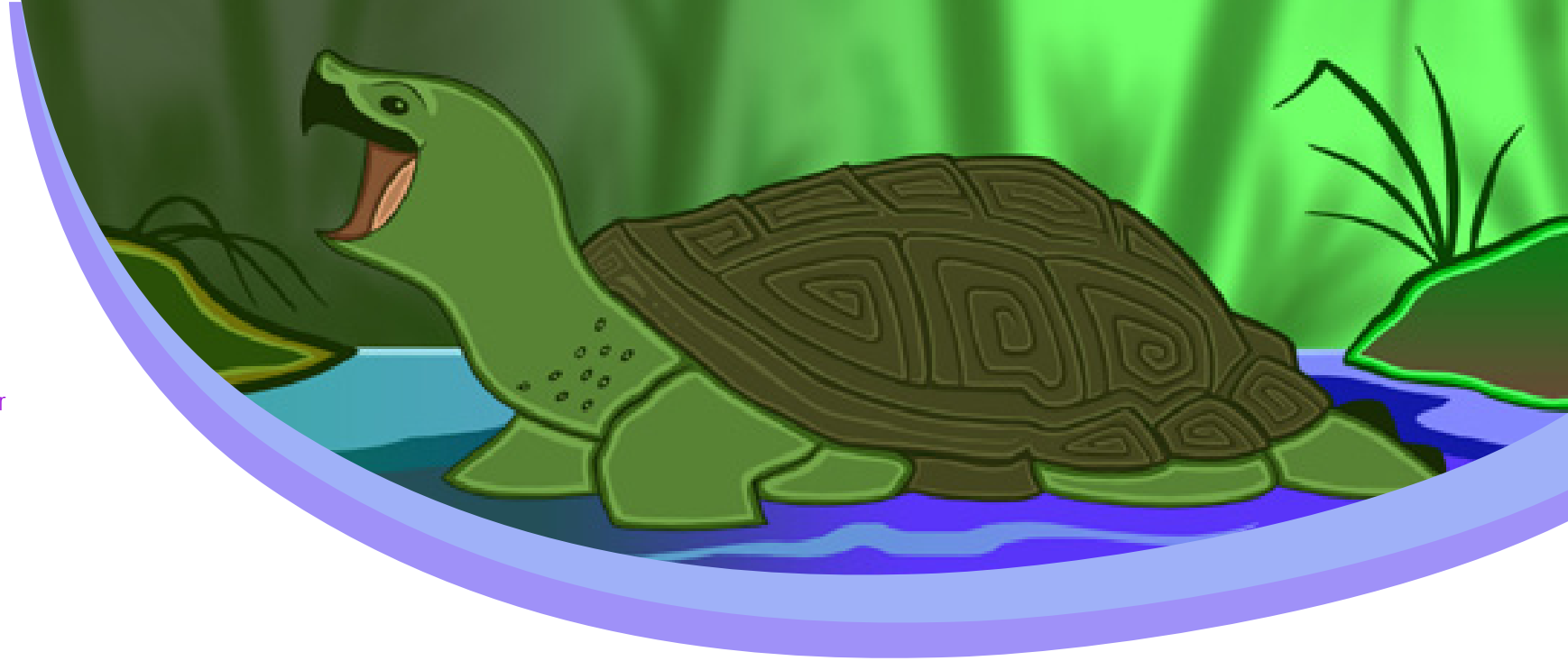
The turtle continued her teaching, "The Old People say that is why humans need to begin each day with an expression of thankfulness, acknowledging all the other members of the great community working together to make life possible. When *Etshitewatsi'a Karahkwa* flies from east to west every morning as the sun rises, it gathers up prayers and takes them to the Creator. Remind your grandchildren Tota Ma, to wake up when the sun rises and offer words of thanksgiving. This will ensure that the world will continue for many generations to come."

"My Auntie Jan is Turtle clan," Tota Ma explained to A'no:wara. "She knows a lot about turtles. She told me that turtle families have specific needs for food, water, shelter, and space. Some of their needs are similar, yet each member of the turtle family is unique and has a special place, responsibility, and role. Sometimes, more than one turtle family will live in a wetland," said Tota Ma.

"I am pleased your Auntie Jan knows so much about my turtle family!" said A'no:wara happily. "Some turtles in the wetland eat only plants and seeds. Some eat small fish like minnows, tiny water plants, snails, tadpoles, worms and sometimes little insects found along the shore," the old turtle shared. "My family members spend most of their lives in the water where we can find food, but we like to bask on logs or rocks to absorb energy from the sun to keep us warm."

A'no:wara continued, "My family can only live in marshes, ponds, and bays that have rocks and logs where we can bask in the sun to soak up its warm rays. I did not start making nests until I was ten years old. When it was time to lay eggs, I returned to my nesting area near the shoreline. My hatchlings usually stay in the nest until spring and then they climb out and hurry back to the water. They need to find shelter in the water plants to be safe from the herons, raccoons, and big fish who like to eat them." Tota Ma thought about the eggs she saved last year by placing a protective covering over them. She hoped that most of those babies survived.

A'no:wara continued to explain to Tota Ma the importance of turtles, "One of the responsibilities



carried on by my turtle babies is to ensure that the water in the marsh is clean and safe. We are also responsible for bringing the message of changing seasons to other animals and plants which live in the wetlands. The Painted turtle is one of the first turtles to hibernate in autumn. I need plenty of space to live, sunning logs, and rocks to warm my body after the long winter. I communicate with the Creator and all other plants and animals in the wetland. If my environment is clean and healthy, I can live to be over one hundred years old!" she explained. Tota Ma was impressed that turtles could live so long, but upset that their life expectancy depended on how much humans polluted the water.

The old turtle continued speaking, "However, many of my family members are not living as long anymore. Changes in the marsh, such as lower water tables, are making it difficult for us. You know, Tota Ma, when you were a little girl, you could not sit on that *raksotha* rock where you are sitting now because it was under water! The marsh has been shrinking in size and that means every living thing has less space to live. Where did all that water go?" A'no:wara asked in a troubled voice.

"The water is warmer than it used to be and it is not as good to drink. I am trying hard to keep the waters clean but there used to be many more turtle brothers and sisters to help. Now there are only a few cousins and myself. We cannot keep up with all the work that must be done." A'no:wara blinked, snapped at a damselfly that landed near the edge of the water, and slowly turned away from the shore.

"My fifth challenge asked you to find out what turtles need to survive. What does a healthy habitat look like? Do you think the habitat in your community is healthy for me and you?" A'no:wara asked.

Tota Ma thought about A'no:wara's words as the old turtle slipped quietly into the water. She watched as A'no:wara swam out of sight, leaving behind ripples in the water and time to think about the teaching shared. She thought about the water. Where did it go? What might happen when A'no:wara and her turtle cousins are gone? Who will keep the water clean in the wetland? She got up slowly and walked back to the house. Tota Ma had a lot to think about.

