

CURRICULUM ACTIVITY CHAPTER THREE

ONTARIO'S TURTLE FAMILIES

AND SPECIES AT RISK

TEACHER BACKGROUND

There are eight turtle species in Ontario including the Blanding's, Midland and western painted, Northern map, Snapping, Spiny softshell, Spotted, Stinkpot, and Wood turtle. Of these eight species, seven are considered Species at Risk. In addition to the eight native species, there is the non-native Red-eared slider, an invasive species, which is present in Ontario. The following terms are associated with Species at Risk:

Special Concern - a wildlife species may become endangered or threatened because of a combination of factors, identified threats, and biological concerns.

Endangered - a wildlife species that is facing imminent extirpation or extinction.

Species at Risk - an extirpated, threatened, endangered species, or a species of special concern.

Threatened - a species that is likely to become endangered if nothing is done to reverse the factors leading to its extirpation or extinction.

Extirpated - a species that no longer exists in the wild in Ontario but may exist elsewhere in the wild.

Extinct - a wildlife species which no longer exists.

Seven of Ontario's eight turtle species can be found on the Species at Risk list (COSEWIC—Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada; OMNR—Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources)



Ontario turtles are at risk for many reasons. Over the last few centuries, more than seventy-five per cent of turtle wetland habitats have been drained for various reasons. Historically, early European settlers and First Nations people did not share the same understanding of wetlands. Europeans did not realize that wetlands purified water in the watersheds and served as a home for important wildlife. Today, human development continues and turtle habitats are depleted or polluted, making it difficult for survival. Turtles have the responsibility of keeping wetlands healthy and clean. They do this by making sure that any insects or small animals that die are eaten and the water is not contaminated. Although turtles are important, long-lived wetland inhabitants, they require protection from human interference.

Red-eared Slider: The Space Invader

The Red-eared slider is the turtle commonly found in pet stores, but it is also an 'invasive' turtle species in Ontario. Many times, a turtle is purchased as a pet and is later released into a pond or wetland where it does not belong. This

'invader' competes for space, food, shelter, and water. Red-eared sliders are from the south-eastern United States and should never be released to the wild. They are not native to this part of Turtle Island and negatively affect other types of turtles.

Turtle diet:

The eight different turtle species have varying diets but most turtles are omnivores. Many turtles eat algae, plant material, insects, and other water creatures. Snapping turtles may eat larger prey such as small fish, frogs, and ducklings. Wood turtles, as a terrestrial turtle, eat worms, berries and other land-based food. Although turtles may eat different types of food, they are important members of the wetland ecosystem.

Conservation Note:

Often, Snapping turtles are unfairly persecuted. While they do eat water fowl and fish, most of these creatures are eaten by other predators such as large fish like bass or pike, owls, and mink! Snapping turtles are frequently caught with the ill or dead prey they are slowly consuming. Snapping turtles are also persecuted out of fear. These turtles 'snap' when on land because they cannot protect themselves by tucking their heads and legs into their shell. When frightened, they snap, just as other frightened animals do, like chipmunks. However, they swim away from danger when in the water and do not bite toes or fingers. We do not need to fear snapping turtles when in the water. It is important for students to learn about Species at Risk to ensure they understand issues related to habitats and communities; conservation efforts; cultural importance; and the importance of biodiversity, particularly in a wetland environment.

Additional Resources:

Canadian Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Network
www.carcnet.ca/english/index.php

Turtle SHELL: Safety Habitat Education Long Life
www.turtleshellorturtle.org/educational_material/index.html

Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre
www.kawarthaturtle.org

Article about our endangered turtles in Southern Ontario (also located in Activity Worksheets section)
www.onnaturemagazine.com/field-trip-turtles.html

Environment Canada's Species at Risk Public Registry website
www.sararegistry.gc.ca/default_e.cfm

Hinterland Who's Who - Species at Risk in Canada
<http://www.hww.ca/hww2.asp?cid=4&id=232>



ACTIVITY

3.1 WHO ARE THE SPECIES AT RISK?

This activity is meant to reinforce an understanding of threats to species, particularly turtles, in a wetland habitat. Literacy and writing are incorporated into this science activity through the use of the activity-based learning strategy, retelling.

Grade four students completing this activity should emphasize habitats and communities, while grade six students should emphasize biodiversity.

Materials:

- Who Are the Species at Risk? sheets (located in the Activity Worksheets section of document)
- Paper and writing tools

Steps:

Use the turtle species handouts to introduce Ontario turtles, including the Red-eared slider, an invasive species. These can be printed for each student, or put onto an overhead for projection. Students may copy point form notes about the different species of turtles for future use.

Discuss the Species at Risk information included on the handouts and note that seven out of eight turtle species in Ontario are considered at risk. Ask students to think about why many turtle species are in this position. See Teacher Background for more information about Species at Risk. Split the class into eight groups and give the students time to develop a rap song, poem, short story, advertisement, or news report to describe a particular species of turtle (Blanding's, Map, Midland and Western painted, Snapping, Eastern spiny soft shell, Spotted, Stinkpot, and Wood turtle). The information included should answer the following questions:

1. Where does this turtle live in Ontario?
2. What is included in its diet? Who feeds on this turtle?
3. Why is this turtle a Species at Risk?
4. What can we do to help save this turtle species?