

Biologist raising awareness for species-at-risk



By Nate Smelle

Throughout the month of April species-at-risk biologist for the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) in Bancroft Graham Cameron has been presenting his research on turtles to the public. He is hopeful that if more people learn to appreciate how important turtles are to the overall health of an ecosystem, then more people will want to protect them.

On Tuesday, April 15 he spoke to the Bancroft Field Naturalists at the Bancroft Fish and Game Clubhouse. Cameron told the crowd that of the eight turtles found in Ontario seven of are listed as species-at-risk. The only species that currently remains off the list he said was the painted turtle. The most endangered turtles in Ontario are the spotted turtle, wood turtles, and the Blanding's turtle.

"Turtles and all reptiles for that matter are the most at risk group of animals on the planet," he said.

Cameron said there are many reasons why turtle populations are on the decline in Ontario and around the world. Some of the main contributing factors include habitat loss and habitat fragmentation, road and boat mortality, being hunted for food and poaching for the pet trade.

"Making things worse, because most turtles don't reach sexual maturity until they are around 16 to 20 years of age they have a very low reproductive rate. That means that during the first couple of decades of their lives they are not reproducing any new turtles."

One of the most important things he said people need to remember is that the health of turtle populations is directly related to the well-being of the breeding adult turtles.

?Luckily for turtles they don't just get old and die as humans do,? said Cameron.

?Turtles possess a unique biological quality called negligible senescence. It takes things like road mortality, pollution, predators, or environmental influences such as climate change.?

The Blanding's turtle is Cameron's specific species of study in his research. It is also a species-at-risk that can be found nesting along the roadside in the Bancroft area. It is very important for the public to pay attention while driving for such species like the Blanding's turtle that become more vulnerable during specific times of the year.

?In June, many turtles travel great distances to return to their preferred nesting site.,? he said.

?This is by far the most dangerous time in a turtle's life. They have to cross roads and rivers, and meet up with all sorts of other dangers. It's quite remarkable what they will go through just to return to these places.?

There are many things people can do to actively protect turtles. For instance, Cameron suggested that unless human health or safety is involved municipalities should only do roadside work such as grading, ditching, culvert replacement and beaver management before the start of June or after Sept. 15.

Cameron was also the guest speaker at the Bancroft Chapter of the Ontario Woodlot Owners Association's AGM. Here he addressed many of the concerns that people in the forestry industry have with turtle conservation and what some of the protective measures mean for their livelihood. He explained how the Endangered Species Act is in place to protect vulnerable species like turtles which in turn protects the biodiversity which is necessary to have a healthy economy in a place like North Hastings. Cameron made it clear that as long as people do what is reasonably expected to avoid harming or killing a turtle or any other species at risk they will not be penalized. On the other hand, if it can be proven that someone has intentionally harmed, or killed an animal protected by the Endangered Species Act they can face a maximum fine of \$250,000 as an individual, or up to \$1 million for corporate offences.

?Ignorance is not an excuse for harming a species-at-risk,? said Cameron.

?The public needs to exercise due diligence when it comes to any type of development that may infringe on them. Because the local economy is so dependent on forestry and tourism a healthy ecosystem translates into a healthy economy.?

He compared a healthy biodiverse ecosystem to an all-star team hockey team made up of evolutionary survivors. As scavengers, turtles play a huge role in maintaining the balance within their environment. Remove them from the equation and the whole ecosystem suffers.

?Just like how a winning hockey team needs a combination of good offense, defence, goaltending, tough guys, goal scorers, etc., who all play well together, the health of an ecosystems also depends upon the diversity of species within it.?