

Local activist comes out of his shell for turtle species

By Sarah Sobanski

A local man is hoping to inspire locals to save endangered species.

Anderson Lake resident Brian Ensoll has coined himself Bri Bri the Turtle Guy as Bancroft and surrounding area's local expert on turtle species and safety tips. He's quickly becoming the turtle advisor for residents in the 750 kilometre radius between Gooderham and Pembroke, and North Bay and Renfrew.

There are eight species of turtles left in Ontario. Two species are endangered, two are threatened, three are may become threatened and one has been extirpated -? meaning it once lived in Ontario but doesn't anymore. Ensoll expected all could be extinct in as little as 10 years.

Ensoll said there are three main reasons why turtles are in danger in the area. One is that many eggs never hatch or they are eaten by other wildlife. Another reason Ensoll suggested that turtles are hunted for the meat, to be served as delicacies, and or to be sold as pets.

Finally, Ensoll blamed outsider traffic targeting turtles on the roads. He has seen as many as 75 instances where drivers have intentionally hit turtles, which is illegal. On one occasion he stopped stopped a 22-year-old who hit a turtle only to turn around and run over it another seven times. Ensoll reported the man was later charged with a hefty fine and lost two points on his licence.

?It's disheartening. [It] makes some of our efforts seem pointless,? said Ensoll.

The Turtle Guy has been identifying and saving turtles from highways in the area since he was seven years old. Now 63, Ensoll patrols the stretch of highway outside his home with his son Ryan and cousin Nancy from sun up until sun down.

In 10 years, Ensoll estimated he's saved 1,100 turtles from roadsides. He wants other residents to keep their eye open too, and do what they can to keep turtles from getting hit on local roads. He wants locals to help him manage the size of his stewardship by becoming informants for their townships.

?Right now hibernation is two months away. [They're] storing up, eating three or times a day,? said Ensoll, explaining why community members should keep their eye open for turtles on the roadside. ?Most people want to help. We're finding people are saying tell us what to do and you don't have to come out here anymore.?

Ensoll explained safety is the most important thing when people are saving turtles on highways. He suggested if a driver pulls over that he or she should get off the road and put their four-ways on. He also said to check for on-coming traffic.

As for interacting with turtles themselves, Ensoll warned that snapping turtles can be extremely dangerous. There is a very small part behind their tails where they can't reach around to bite. It's better to call an expert, than to try to pick up the turtle. Snappers can however, be pushed from behind with a blunt object to get them where they need to go. For non-snappers, it's easiest to pick up the turtle by its shell just behind their front legs. Ensoll said that turning a turtle around doesn't work. They will always try to cross the road again.

In the case of an injured turtle, a driver should transport the turtle to a turtle trauma centre. The closest is the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre in Peterborough. Drivers should never put turtles in water to transport them.

?They whine, it makes you cry the whole way down. It's the only time I speed,? said Ensoll.

The best way to transport a turtle is to put them on a blanket, or somewhere soft as water could poison or drown them. Area

residents can volunteer as turtle taxis as another way to get involved.

Anyone looking for more information, or how to get involved in Ensoll effort to save native turtles, can email him at bribriheturtleguy@gmail.com.