

Turtle conservation continues amid COVID-19



May 11, 2020 By Nate Smelle

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has put a hold on most community-based activities throughout Ontario, it hasn't slowed turtle guardian Kelly Wallace down one bit. With many turtles now awaking from their winter slumber and the peak of nesting season just around the corner, as usual at this time of year she has been busy raising awareness of what people can do to protect Ontario's turtles. As the founder of Think Turtle Conservation Initiative ? a grassroots initiative focused on turtle conservation in the Bancroft area and throughout Ontario ? Wallace has been doing all she can to protect these threatened species. From road mortality, to habitat loss, to illegal poaching for the pet trade, Wallace said there are many challenges threatening turtles in Ontario. With so many people spending the majority of their time at home due to the pandemic, Wallace said there are lots of things they can be doing to help turtles and wildlife. ?By focusing on the things you can be doing in your backyard might not seem that big a deal to some people, but when you figure that a lot of people in the community are doing the same thing, that adds up,? she explained. ?And when you think about all the people doing those things in communities across Ontario, it certainly makes a big difference. That is why home-based conservation efforts are so amazing. I don't think people realize how valuable those little things they are doing are. Even something like purchasing a sign, which might not seem like a big deal, but when they put that sign up they are increasing awareness and the money that they have spent is going to help turtle conservation. ?Despite having to cancel several ?Turtle Talks? and their annual ?Turtle Festival? in June, Wallace said COVID-19 has the potential to improve conservation efforts in the area because people now have more time on their hands to help. While the Turtle Festival has been cancelled, she said they are still planning to go ahead with a social media campaign for World Turtle Day on May 23. To raise awareness about turtles and the threats they face locally and around the world, she said they are inviting people to paint turtle themed rocks and share them online. The ways to help are almost limitless, Wallace said. Giving yet another example of how people have been helping turtles during the pandemic, Wallace said so far this year there have been more people than ever stepping up to transport injured turtles to the Ontario Turtle Trauma Centre. However, as the peak season approaches, she said the need for turtle taxi drivers will only continue to increase, so more drivers will be needed soon. ?Fortunately helping turtles is something that you can do where you can be physically distancing,? said Wallace. ?People can volunteer to drive turtle taxi, because it is something you can do on your own anyways. The way they have it set up at the turtle hospital is so that there is no human to human contact; and they are permitted to be open, so there is a lot that people can be doing while abiding by health and safety measures. ?When it comes down to it, Wallace said the most effective way to help protect turtles is as a community. Recognizing how the pandemic has put a lot of strain on people both financially and mentally, she said people can improve their own health and well-being by getting involved with helping turtles. It is amazing how therapeutic being outdoors and connecting with nature is, Wallace said. She continued ?It lifts peoples' spirits and we need that right now. Sometimes people don't realize that until they go outside to start taking in the fresh air, and maybe see a turtle or a bird. That's the sort of stuff people need to be doing right now. It is much better than drinking and sitting in and watching TV. ?By taking photographs of turtles and documenting the locations where they have been seen while spending time outdoors, Wallace said people

can report those sightings to Think Turtle Conservation Initiative or another turtle protection group. Such data is incredibly important to helping further conservation efforts, she said. The cool thing about that is once they have reported it, it means that next year that data might help with research about where turtle activity is. Depending on where it is, if it is an area where it has been determined that there is a lot of road mortality, it might even help to get an underpass in the area," added Wallace. In an effort to engage local leaders in turtle protection, Wallace recently sent Bancroft council a letter outlining two ways they can have a positive impact on local turtle populations. The first thing council can do, she said is not schedule any road shoulder grading during turtle nesting season which peaks in the month of June. While she understands that grading road shoulders is a necessity each year after the winter, she said the timing of which it takes place needs to be adjusted so that turtles can nest in peace. Noting that turtles typically nest between the end of May and mid July, Wallace is asking that council keep this in mind when scheduling road shoulder grading and similar types of maintenance. Pointing out how turtles nest in almost the exact same location each year, Wallace explained that when road shoulders in these areas are graded at this time of year their nests are being damaged or destroyed, leaving turtles with "almost zero chance of species recovery." Another issue pertaining to turtle protection Wallace is hoping the town will take action on is a known turtle crossing "hot spot" on Hastings Street North just north of Churchill Park. Since first bringing this area of concern to the town's attention in 2017, she said there have been several painted turtles killed along this particular stretch of road. After climbing out of the York River and crossing Hastings Street North to nest on the shoulder on the opposite side of the road, Wallace said most of the dead turtles she has photographed appear to have been hit while crossing back to return to the York River when they have finished nesting. One of the things that makes this location such a danger zone for turtles, she explained, is that that many drivers do not expect to see turtles crossing the road to nest so close to town. To help reduce the risk of road mortality in this area, Wallace has asked that the town for permission to install a pair of "Watch 4 Turtles" signs on each side of the road along this section of road from May to September. She is also requesting that permission be given to Think Turtle Conservation Initiative to thoroughly investigate the area by foot and by canoe along with a public works representative so they can determine where the turtles are finding their way through. Once these areas are identified Wallace is also requesting that the Town of Bancroft supply rocks of varying sizes "similar to the rocks already along the York River banks" that will be used to block the turtle traffic corridors leading to the road mortality "hot spot" on Hastings Street North. To learn more about Think Turtle Conservation Initiative, and/or to get involved visit their Facebook Page. To report an injured turtle contact Kelly Wallace by email at: thinkturtle@yahoo.com; or by phone 647-606-9537.