

Turtles In A Perilous Time

by Matt Ellerbeck

Turtles have proved that they are one of time's most successful survivors. They have been on this Earth for well over 200 million years. This means that they were here long before the mammals, before the birds, and even before the dinosaurs. They have managed to survive throughout the ages, while countless other species have disappeared around them. Today however, the turtle is living in a perilous time. Around 70% of the world's turtle species are now listed on The World Conservation Union's Redlist of threatened species. For some turtles it is already too late. Several turtle species have already gone extinct. Many more are being pushed to the brink of extinction.

For many people, the term endangered species conjures up images of exotic animals far from home. However, the decline of turtle populations can be seen right in our own backyards. In Ontario, all eight turtle species that occur here are in decline. Six of these eight turtles are listed as a Species At Risk by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. This is both a despairing and unsettling fact as the turtles' current state is almost completely due to the actions of people! There are several different factors contributing to the endangerment of the world's turtles.

The biggest issue affecting turtles today is the loss and fragmentation of their natural habitat. Turtle habitats of all kinds are being degraded and destroyed at an alarming rate. Wetlands are drained, forests are destroyed, and waterfronts are developed. Turtles are literally losing their homes.

The increase of human activities and recreation on the water and on beaches also affects turtles and their nests in a negative way. Waterfront developments restrict turtles from prime basking and nesting sites. Contaminants and sewage run off from such developments can also cause harm. Pesticides, oils, chemicals, and industrial pollution may contaminate the habitats of turtles and their local prey items. When the turtles eat contaminated prey, they may become poisoned and die. These developments may also cause water levels to rise which can drown turtle nests. Driving on beaches with cars and four wheelers can destroy nests laid in the sand. Recreational activities on the water can also have devastating affects on turtles. such as being killed or severely injured when they are hit by boats or water vehicles. Fishermen will often kill turtles for fear of that the reptiles prey heavily on game fish.

Where good habitat does still exist, it is often altered by roads and highways. This leads to the death of countless turtles on roads. Legions of turtles must cross roads when looking for nest sites to lay their eggs. This is particularly detrimental to populations because not only does it lead to the death of a large portion of the breeding population, the female turtles, but the next generation of turtles is also killed off when the eggs are destroyed. This can lead to local populations of turtle species becoming exterminated.

Even if the female turtles do successfully find nesting spots and lay their eggs, the baby turtles only have a very minimal chance of reaching maturity. Nests are often destroyed by predators like raccoons and skunks. While human activities have had negative effects on turtles, they have helped increase these predators. The increase in human waste provides an unlimited food source for these nest raiders. This has caused their populations to grow. This surplus of predators takes a very heavy toll on turtle nests.

Turtles, including rare and endangered ones, also suffer from being harvested from the wild at an almost unfathomable rate. Turtles and their eggs are collected for the pet trade, food markets or to be used in traditional medicines. Sometimes the turtles and their eggs are captured right off nesting sites.

Certain turtles, especially the snapping turtles, are often the victims of direct killings by people.

Many people believe snapping turtles are dangerous to swimmers and will kill them on site. In truth, snapping turtles are not dangerous if left alone. Witnesses have observed people shooting turtles for "sport" and studies have shown that many times people will purposely hit turtles they encounter on roads.

When all the factors above are combined, it accounts for a massive amount of turtles being lost. These animals are extremely long-lived and it takes them many years to reach maturity. This makes it very hard for turtles to recover from drastic population declines. Many turtle species are simply not equipped to deal with the many hurdles that people have created for them. Hundreds of species are unlikely to survive without assistance. If we do not take the time to take better care of our natural resources and to reverse our detrimental actions towards turtles, we could lose one of our oldest and most successful creatures. If this happens what hope do other species have?