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Stories About Canada's Natural Heritage

October 15, 2007

Getting to know turtles

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Population monitoring in St. Lawrence Islands National Park of Canada

Marie-Andrée Carrière has a mission: to raise awareness and protect habitat for Canada's wildlife. And as a biology student and experienced researcher, she is well on her way to making a difference. Marie-Andrée has helped develop a population monitoring program for two fragile species in [St. Lawrence Islands National Park of Canada](#): the [northern map turtle](#) and the [stinkpot turtle](#).

Why study turtles?

People are often surprised that seemingly tough little creatures like turtles may be vulnerable. But both the northern map turtle and the stinkpot are a big concern for park managers. Both these [species at risk](#) have suffered from habitat loss and are prone to additional threats such as road kill and encounters



Marie-Andrée has helped develop a population monitoring program for the northern map turtle and the stinkpot turtle in St. Lawrence Islands National Park.

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with boat propellers.

Finding out what turtles need

Park managers knew very little about local populations until Marie-Andrée came along. She is [radio-tracking](#) turtles of both species to document their movements and identify which habitats they use. Marie-Andrée intends to compare the habitat choices among males, females, adults and juveniles. The information will help her gauge the health of the populations and see what role the national park can play in protecting their habitat.



Radio-tracking turtles allows Marie-Andrée to document turtles' movements and identify which habitats they use. Transmitters are never more than 5% of the turtle's body weight.

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Looking beyond park boundaries

Already, Marie-Andrée has found that the turtles often range beyond park boundaries. A big part of Marie-Andrée's work has been on private lands, which contain important habitat.

"The landowners have been great," says Marie-Andrée. "Everybody can relate to turtles." She points out that many of us have turtle stories and may have had turtles as pets. One landowner was thrilled to learn that turtles were nesting on his property. "He wants to do everything he can to cooperate with Parks Canada," says Marie-Andrée.

Working for turtles

Conservation officials, too, are important allies. In her radio tracking, Marie-Andrée discovered a new threat to the map turtle. Turtles travelling through Thompson's Bay were being caught



in commercial fishing traps, and many drowned. This could be serious: even a one or two percent loss can be catastrophic for a turtle



The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada has designated the northern map turtle a species of Special Concern.

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population. Following Marie-Andrée's discovery, conservation officials began working with local fishermen to address the problem.

Mutual benefits

Marie-Andrée's work with Parks Canada has been great for everyone - turtles included. Parks Canada is gaining valuable data for managing the St. Lawrence Islands, and Marie-Andrée will get a master's degree for her work. Besides, she says, for researchers, "turtles are great species." Three out of the five local species have been listed at risk. Little is known about these turtles which makes studying them important and the continuous discovery about them exciting. Also, compared to some small mammal populations which experience periodic population crashes, turtles have relatively stable populations. This stability makes it easier to gather long-term data and study human influences on species' numbers.

Working with the public has also helped Marie-Andrée learn about conservation teamwork. "You can't save the world alone," she says.

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