

Baby turtles released at Seneca College

Former Toronto Mayor David Miller (CEO of WWF-Canada) joined King Mayor Steve Pellegrini in releasing baby snapping turtles into the waters at Seneca College last week.

Local residents joined Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre (OTCC) and WWF-Canada last week to return 15 at-risk snapping turtle hatchlings to their wetland habitat at Seneca College's King Campus.

The story of these turtles began last fall, when turtle eggs were discovered on a bridge scheduled to be torn down on the campus. Facilities manager Rick Greenlaw alerted Dr. Sue Carstairs, a professor at Seneca and executive and medical director of the OTCC. She collected, incubated and hatched the eggs as part of the OTCC's head-starting program.

With the help of WWF-Canada's Go Wild Community grants presented by TELUS, the OTCC hosted a public event to celebrate their release, offering a rare opportunity to see a species at risk returned to the wild. Other rare turtles from OTCC's education program were also on hand to raise awareness about threats to turtles and teach the public how they can help turtles recover and thrive in the wild.

Turtle releasers include King Mayor Steve Pellegrini, David Agnew, president of Seneca College; and David Miller, president and CEO of WWF-Canada. The public also had the chance to take part in the release.

The hatchlings released are just one clutch of hundreds the OTCC helps each year. In 2015, OTCC hatched more than 1,000 turtles through the head-starting program.

More than 500 adult turtles annually receive treatment at the centre's hospital, contributing to OTCC's goal of protecting and conserving Ontario's native turtles and habitats.

In Ontario, seven of the eight turtle species are considered at risk.

Less than 1 per cent of eggs make it to adulthood, so every turtle hatchling saved through OTCC's head-starting program is crucial to preventing turtles from disappearing from our ecosystems.

Habitat loss and fragmentation have played a major role in the decline of turtles as marshes, swamps, bogs and fens where turtles live are drained, filled or otherwise altered.

Road mortality is also becoming a major threat to turtles as more roads are built through remaining wetlands.

WWF-Canada is working to better understand and raise awareness about the threats faced by freshwater species, including turtles, by performing the first ever nation-wide assessment of our watersheds. For more information, visit wwf.ca/watershedreports. Every turtle hatchling that OTCC rescues and returns to the wild makes a difference and will help Ontario's turtle populations recover. I am thrilled to have the support of WWF-Canada and TELUS on this event so we can teach more people about the importance of turtles and the role they play in maintaining healthy wetlands," said Dr. Carstairs.

"As one of the largest landowners in the Oak Ridges Moraine, we understand the importance of being good stewards of this vital natural asset and the wildlife we share with it. We are delighted to work with WWF-Canada and the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre to protect this vital population of snapping turtles at our King Campus," Agnew said.

"The Go Wild Community Grants program was created to empower Canadians to connect deeply with nature and take action to address major conservation challenges, starting in their own communities. The Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre is working to protect at-risk species and educate Ontarians about the threats facing turtles - threats we're understanding more about through WWF-Canada's Watershed Reports," Miller added.