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MEDIA RELEASE

Report reveals Ontario snapping turtles in peril; Demands end to hunt

Prehistoric turtles face triple threat from hunting, road kill and toxins

TORONTO – The David Suzuki Foundation, Ontario Nature and the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre released a new report today documenting the plight of Ontario’s imperilled snapping turtles, prehistoric creatures that have been around for 40 million years but are being pushed to the brink of extinction. *The Road to Extinction: A Call to End the Snapping Turtle Hunt* highlights a controversial provincial policy that allows snappers to be hunted, despite being listed as a species at risk, and identifies eight hotspots where thousands of turtles are being run over and killed by cars each year.

“This report demonstrates that snapping turtles cannot withstand such high mortality rates,” said Dr. Anne Bell, director of conservation and education with Ontario Nature. “It is our hope that the Province will act on our recommendation to ban the hunt – one simple step towards protecting this amazing animal.”

The report calls for an end to the Ministry of Natural Resources controversial policy that allows anyone with a provincial game or fishing licence to "bag" up to two snapping turtles a day – a policy that the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario recently said should end.

“Snapping turtles face an uncertain future in Ontario because we have paved over 70 percent of southern Ontario’s wetlands and created corridors of death with our roads and highways,” said Dr. Sue Carstairs, Medical Director at the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre. “While we must find long term solutions to deal with these threats, the province has the power to give snappers a fighting chance today by ending the hunt.”

The report recommends that:

- * Ontarians call their MPP and tell him or her to support a ban on hunting snapping turtles;
- * Municipalities and the province install wildlife passages in key road mortality hotspots identified in the report;
- * The federal government ban the release of persistent, bioaccumulative toxic substances into the air and water; and
- * The public help turtles safely cross roads and report sightings to Ontario Nature's Reptile and Amphibian Atlas.



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“The future of these prehistoric creatures now depends on the choices we make and the action we take – and the solutions are clear,” said Rachel Plotkin, Biodiversity Policy Analyst at the David Suzuki Foundation. “We must ensure that our remaining wetlands are protected and continue to build infrastructure that provides safe passage for turtles. And Ontario’s hunt for snappers simply must end.”

- 30 -

For more information, please download a copy of the report at www.ontarionature.org, or www.davidsuzuki.org, or www.kawarthaturtle.org or contact:

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MEDIA BACKGROUNDER

SNAPPING TURTLES

- Snapping turtles have been around for 40 million years and live in Ontario's wetlands – 70 percent of southern Ontario's wetlands have already been lost
- Snapping turtles mature very slowly and offspring have a very low probability of survival
- Scientists have shown that a 10 percent increase in adult mortality in a snapping turtle population would result in the disappearance of half of that population in less than 20 years
- The dominant threats to snapping turtle survival are habitat loss and fragmentation, pollution, road mortality, and legal and illegal hunting

SNAPPING TURTLE POLICY

- The snapping turtle is listed under Ontario's Endangered Species Act as a species of special concern, meaning they are currently vulnerable to extinction
- The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) permits the hunting of snapping turtles by anyone with a valid Ontario small game or fishing licence, with a limit of killing up to two snapping turtles a day and a possession limit of five turtles
- There is little monitoring or scientific data available about how many turtles remain in the province or how many turtles are killed by hunting, road mortality or other causes each year
- In his 2010/11 annual report, the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario concluded that MNR should exercise a precautionary approach and impose a moratorium or ban on the hunting of snapping turtles until the issue had been properly examined with full public consultation
- Quebec and Nova Scotia have already passed bans on hunting snapping turtles

THE REPORT

- The report outlines the most significant threats to snapping turtles, including hunting and road mortality, and calls on the government to end the unsustainable hunt of the snapping turtle



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- The report identifies eight of Ontario's most notorious road mortality hotspots for turtles: County of Haliburton and northern City of Kawartha Lakes; Highway 7 from Norwood to Maberly; Highway 69/400 from Port Severn to Sudbury; Greater Golden Horseshoe; Highway 60, especially through Algonquin Provincial Park; Essex County, especially Pelee Island; Highway 17 west of Sudbury; Presqu'ile Provincial Park and surrounding area
- The report also examined the levels of two persistent toxic chemicals – polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and mercury – that these top predators absorb from Ontario's often highly polluted lakes, marshes and rivers
- Analysis of fat tissue samples from 12 adult turtles found that 75 percent had polychlorinated biphenol ethers (PCB) concentrations that exceeded safe levels for consumption by women of child-bearing age and children under 15 and 25 percent had PCB concentrations that exceeded safe levels for all people. All samples from an analysis from 14 turtles contained mercury, a potent neurotoxin
- The report concludes by identifying actions people can take to ensure that the snapping turtle endures long into the future such as asking their local Member of Provincial Parliament to support an end to the snapping turtle hunt; learning how to help turtles cross roads; and helping to monitor turtle mortality in their community

THE GROUPS

- The David Suzuki Foundation is a national charitable organization that uses science-based education and advocacy to catalyze social change and spur a more sustainable future www.davidsuzuki.org
- Ontario Nature is a charitable organization that protects wild species and wild spaces through conservation, education and public engagement and represents more than 30,000 members and supporters and over 140 member groups across Ontario www.ontarionature.org
- The Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre (KTTC) is a registered charity, established in 2002, whose goal is to aid in the conservation of Ontario's turtles and the habitat in which they live through rehabilitation of injured turtles and public outreach. www.kawarthaturtle.org