

Fact sheet 6

The spiny softshell turtle

Dead turtle probably hit by a boat propeller



Photo : Robert Galbraith

Is there a problem?

The life of the spiny softshell turtle?

- ♦ The spiny softshell turtle is as rare as its habitat. It has been located in one area only in Québec: in the Missisquoi Bay.
- ♦ It feasts on crayfish and gladly swallows worms, mollusk, fish, tadpole and frogs.
- ♦ The adult female is twice as long as the male. The female can reach 45 cm.
- ♦ The spiny softshell turtle hibernates deep below the water surface from November to April. From year to year, it uses the same sites, named hibernia.
- ♦ In June, the female buries about 10 to 15 eggs on sandy shores. It is the temperature of the ground that will determine the length of the incubation period for the eggs and the birth date of the baby tortoise.
- ♦ Maturity is reached at 15 years old. Out of a few hundred eggs, only few turtles will survive and breed.
- ♦ The softshell turtle is especially vulnerable during the nesting period. Nautical activities such as boating and fishing can cause a delay in the nesting or a later abandon in the site of laying. A one week extension time can sufficiently delay the hatching of the eggs and prevent the newborn animals to reach the water before they get frozen.

The spiny softshell turtle (*Apalone spinifera*) is the only softshell turtle of its kind in Québec. Designated as “threatened” since 2000, it is present here at its northern limit of distribution, isolated from the other North American populations. This species who lives a long time (50 years and more) inhabits aquatic environments where it feeds on benthic species (who lives on the bottom). It goes on shores to expose itself to the sun and lay its eggs. The losses of habitat by lakeside development and by competition with man are the main threats to the species’ survival. This way, your beautiful sand beaches are also the spiny softshell turtle’s favorites! Naturally timid, it is especially sensitive to bothersome change, to the extent of compromising its activities of reproduction and laying. Females, in particular, travel far during migration periods. Any factor capable of affecting or reducing movement between, for example the building of dams, change in habitats or intense human activity on the water could harm the turtle population by limiting the access -

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Phone : (450) 248-0100

Fax : (450) 248-0152

E-mail : corpo.missisquoi@acbm.net

203, rue Phillips CP 360
Phillispburg (Québec) JOJ 1N0

Beware of small beaches on waterside properties. They can help mother turtle to nest if they are natural. Retaining walls or other artificial structures on the bank are not natural and can cause abnormal water fluctuations and the flooding of beaches and nests.



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Photo : FAPAQ

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Useful references

If you find a softshell turtle, you can Société zoologique de Granby, Zoo de Granby (450) 372-9113

www.zoodegranby.com

To obtain recommendations or to help the spiny softshell turtle restoration team in its efforts of conservation, if you observe a spiny softshell turtle, dial the following numbers:

Nature Conservancy (514) 876-1606

www.natureconservancy.ca

For other informations :

Société de la faune et des parcs du Québec (450)-928-7607

www.mrnfp.gouv.qc.ca/faune

Ecomuseum : Atlas de amphibiens et des reptiles du Québec Suivi des populations d'amphibiens du Québec

Société d'histoire naturelle de la vallée du Saint-Laurent (514)-457-9449

www.ecomuseum.ca

There are solutions !

To avoid	Why	Our recommendations
Modifying shorelines	Stone pitching, retaining walls, cement/concrete descents are all inadequate for laying.	Leave shores in their natural state. Inform yourself at the Missisquoi Bay Corporation to obtain free advice and help to create near-natural environments which will respect the animal.
Walking on sandy shores which are suspected of having being visited by a mother or those which are protected.	Some of the turtle's eggs are buried only 5cm from the surface of the sand. The exterior envelop of the eggs is as fragile as bird eggshell.	Simply walking on the nest could cause the eggs to explode. Most of all, do not dig up the nests. A small change in the orientation of the eggs in the nest compromises the development of the embryos.
Bothering a turtle during its sunbath	A cold-blood animal, the turtle needs heat to activate its metabolism and help with digestion. It is therefore a very precious and privileged moment.	During your nautical activities, reduce your speed! The turtle might have time to escape.
Unhooking a turtle stuck on your hook yourself, or worse, cutting your line and letting slip away the hurt animal.	In a stressed situation, the turtle can be scared and bite or scratch. The hook and the line can kill the turtle.	Immediately contact the Granby Zoo, which will intervene to save the animal. As a fisherman, respect protected environments by avoiding them.

This research was conducted by Joanie Lussier

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