

## **Science, Education and Sympathy, a Strategy for Successful Stewardship of Turtles in Ontario**

*Scott Gillingwater, Species-at-Risk Biologist; Upper Thames River Conservation Authority and Longpoint Causeway Steering Committee*

Since 1994, a long-term turtle research and recovery initiative has been active in southwestern Ontario. Initial surveys for the spiny softshell turtle along the Thames and Sydenham Rivers, later evolved into long-term research and education efforts directed at a number of reptile species throughout the Thames River Watershed, and areas along the north shore of Lake Erie.

In partnerships with a large number of groups, organizations, individuals and the media, this program has made great strides in turtle stewardship. While a strong focus has been on the spotted turtle, spiny softshell, Blanding's turtle and queen snake, efforts have included all of Ontario's turtle species and a number of other reptiles and amphibians. The collection of long-term data has always been a key component, necessary for the effective recovery of species and habitat in this region. Detailed surveys and research programs have been initiated on a number of species within lake, marsh and river habitats. Additionally, through public education and volunteer opportunities we have helped nurture an understanding of not only reptiles at risk in this region, but also of our local environments. We have discovered an effective multi-disciplinary approach to species conservation. Though lack of funding continually threatens the existence of this program, it has survived for over 14 years. Without a combination of long-term dedicated staff, consistent research and evolving education programs, effective recovery of reptile populations is limited. Through efficient planning and devoted people, positive changes are being realized. Since 2000 alone, we have marked and collected data on over 2000 turtles, completed telemetry studies on a number of turtles in lake, marsh and river habitats, protected hundreds of turtle nests, released many thousands of hatchlings, created, protected and maintained habitat, developed new and efficient study techniques, reached over 30,000 people directly and countless others indirectly, contributed to the development of recovery documents and planning guidelines, enlisted the support of landowners, published educational materials and created a 60 page book on the stewardship of the spiny softshell in Canada. The establishment of similar programs throughout Ontario is a necessary first step in slowing the current decline of reptile populations. While this is not the final answer, it is an effective start.