



A reptilian take on your bright green lawn

By Collette Adkins Giese / July 31, 2012

It has always baffled me. Right here in the suburbs of the Twin Cities you see your neighbors – good people, people you know and like – standing there on perfectly groomed lawns spraying more fertilizers, mole killers, pesticides, whatever it takes to keep the glossy green look I guess they're after.

They're smart people, so they have to know that all that poison either seeps into the groundwater or gets washed directly into the local waterways and ponds — like the pond down the street where their kids and my kids like to go to play and check out the tadpoles and frogs.

Being a trained biologist, it's easy for me to get pessimistic about what we're doing to the planet. But I don't want my 5- and 6-year-olds to feel any of that weight. So I just try to stoke their love of nature.

I show them all the critters in our local pond – the one where all the neighborhood pesticides end up. We take canoe trips and hikes. We just got back from Yellowstone, where we saw buffalo and elk and wolves and all those amazing hot springs and geysers.

Still, the work I do can make it tough for me to stay positive. As a biologist and attorney specializing in the protection of rare

amphibians and reptiles, I know in great scientific detail many of the reasons frogs, turtles and salamanders, like so many species, are dying off at as much as 10,000 times their historic rates. And I know they're remarkably accurate indicator species whose health offers us a picture window on what we're doing to our own health and the broader environment – the one I'm leaving behind to those kids of mine some day.

Petition for protection

That's why I chose my line of work. Earlier this month (July 11) I completed the largest legal petition targeting the protection of reptiles and amphibians ever filed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The petition, which I did for the conservation group I work with, includes 53 species, from lizards with specially adapted toes that help them to run without sinking into desert sands, to the world-famous wood turtles found right here in Minnesota. If you collected those turtles as a kid, you weren't alone. The colorful markings on their necks and legs and the cool geometric growth-line etchings on their shells make them highly coveted across much of the world. That popularity, coupled with habitat loss and degradation, has left wood turtles in serious decline.

Overall, scientists estimate that about 25 percent of the nation's amphibians and reptiles are at risk of extinction, yet they make up only 58 of the approximately 1,400 U.S. species that have received federal protection.

A long process

For me, the good news is that the 53 species in our petition have a great chance of surviving if we offer them the protections of the Endangered Species Act, because it has prevented 99 percent of species placed under its care from going extinct. It's a long bureaucratic process, and many of these increasingly rare animals don't have much time left. But it offers me some hope.

And my two wonderful kids are helping me to build on that hope. They came back from our Yellowstone trip and immediately starting selling popsicles to the neighborhood kids to raise money for their own little conservation project.

They say they're planning to move to the Amazon to protect all the animals in the rainforest.