



HEALTHY HABITATS

CHAPTER 5 - EKO-NAANANING GINJIGAN

During a visit to the marsh, Nokomis Annie stopped to observe changes in the season. She placed an offering of *asemaa* at the edge of *nibi*, sat down on her favourite rock, and closed her eyes while she focused on the sounds of the community. When Nokomis Annie first sat down, there were few sounds coming from the marsh. After she had settled down on that old *Mishomis* rock, the animals went back to their work and she heard their sounds again.

Nokomis Annie remembered when she was a little girl, helping her grandfather catch minnows in the marsh. There were many things to look at and listen to at the *nibi* such as *bineshiinh* singing and *mogkii* croaking. It was a place full of life! Her grandfather talked to her about the marsh and the wonderful gifts it had to offer. He talked about how much it was needed. Nokomis Annie's grandfather told her that all living things have four basic needs—food, water, shelter, and space.

However, the food must be nutritious and healthy, the *nibiish* drinkable and clean, and the shelter must protect creatures from weather and predators. Every plant and animal needs enough space to find food, water and shelter. He also explained that shelter includes a place to be cared for. Shelter is more than a house, it is a home!

There is an understanding in Creation that each plant and animal on *Aki* has its own special place. Nokomis Annie thought about her needs and realized that because humans were the last created, they depend upon every other member of Creation.

The sun was warm on Nokomis Annie's back and she was starting to nod off when she sensed something watching her. She opened one eye slowly and there at her feet sat *Miskwaadesi*! The old turtle's shell was wet and sparkling in the afternoon sun.

"*Aaniin* Nokomis, it is good to see you today. I was hoping that you would come by," said *Miskwaadesi*.

Nokomis Annie told the old turtle that she was grateful for all of the sights and sounds of life in the wetland. *Miskwaadesi* nodded her ancient head in agreement.



The old turtle spoke again in her quiet voice, "It is your responsibility to be thankful for the gifts that have been given to you. This reminds me of a very old teaching from long ago. After the Creator thought everything into existence and placed all the elements, plants, and animals on *Aki*, the Creator gave each their responsibilities. Then, when everything was ready, the Creator created humans," said *Miskwaadesi*.

"My turtle ancestors shared this story with me. They talked about how much the humans depended on us. We, the older brothers and sisters of Creation,

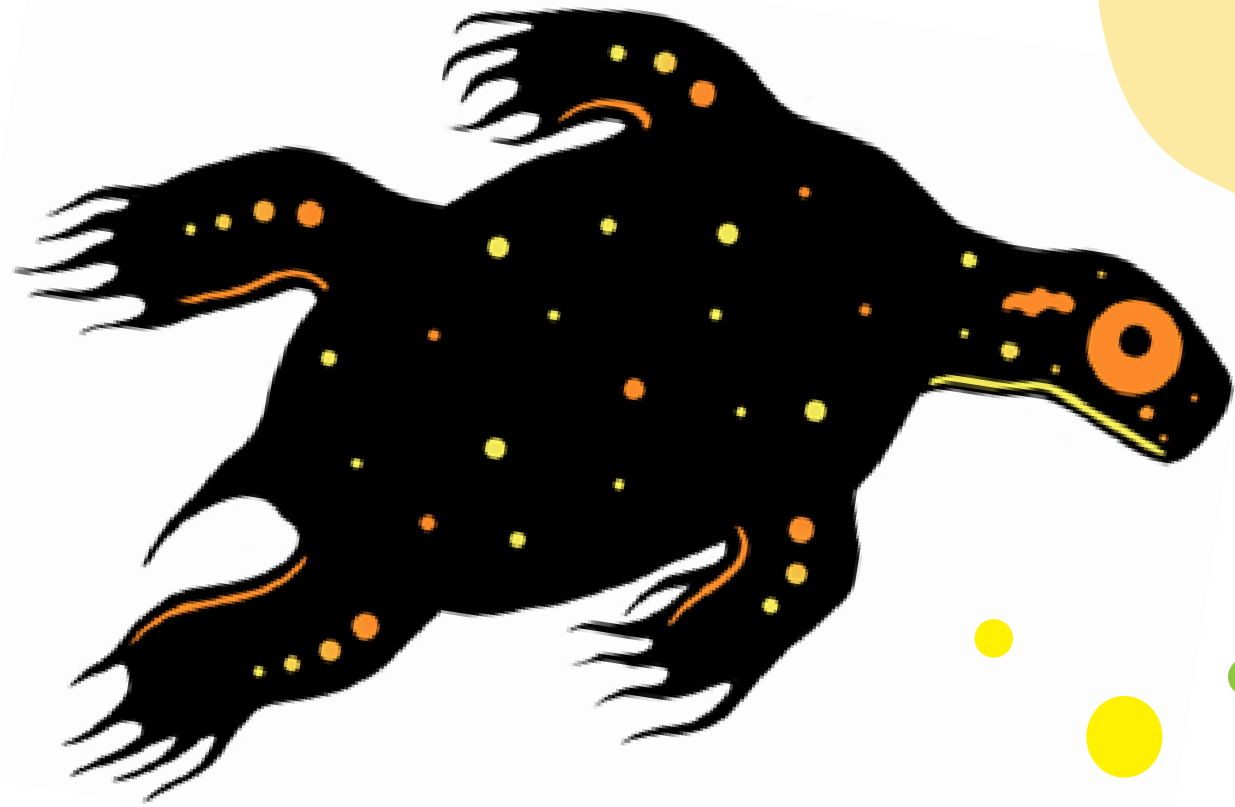
were given the responsibility to provide humans with food and to make sure that *nibi* stayed clean and healthy," explained the old turtle. *Miskwaadesi* paused briefly to observe a beautiful, red dragonfly zip across the pond.

"All that the Creator asked of you, the youngest of Creation, was that you show gratitude and give thanks for the other members of Creation who so

readily shared themselves with you. Those first humans agreed and showed their gratitude every morning by offering their *asemaa*, prayers, and thanksgiving to *Gzhe Minidoo*," explained *Miskwaadesi*.

The old turtle continued, "As time went by, the humans became forgetful. They were so busy enjoying the gifts of Creation that they forgot to be grateful. *Gzhe Minidoo* looked down upon all of Creation and was very disappointed to see that humans were not showing gratitude. The Creator decided to destroy *Aki* and everything on it. The *Migizi* understood the Creator's thoughts and spoke up in defence of humans who were young and weak. The *Migizi* asked that humans be given another chance. The Creator sent *Migizi* to fly over all of Creation, from east to west, looking for a lodge where humans were showing thanks and gratitude. The Creator promised to spare Creation if good news was brought back. At dawn the next day, the *Migizi* set out on his journey across Turtle Island, flying from east to west, searching for signs of thanks. At the very last village, in a tiny lodge at the end of the trail, the *Migizi* saw a thin plume of smoke rising up to the sky. The smoke was from the *asemaa* which an old *Nokomis* and *Mishomis* placed on their morning fire. The elderly couple was offering a prayer of thanksgiving, speaking to all the different plants, animals, elements, and helpers that surrounded them. The *Migizi* flew back to the Sky-world to report to the Creator that he had found a couple who remembered to be grateful. The Creator was pleased and promised to spare Creation as long as there was evidence of thanks and gratitude." *Miskwaadesi* took a deep breath and closed her eyes.





Nokomis Annie remembered the story and thanked *Miskwaadesi* for bringing it back to her memory.

The turtle continued her teaching, "The Old People say that is why humans need to begin the day with a prayer of thanks, acknowledging all other members of the great community which work together to make life possible. When *Migizi* flies from east to west every morning as the sun rises, it gathers up humankind's prayers and takes them to the Creator."

This teaching helped Nokomis Annie to understand the importance of gratitude and thanks for Creation. It was important that she also teach this to her grandchildren so they could continue giving thanks to the Creator for the world around them.

"My Auntie Jan is Turtle clan," Nokomis Annie explained to *Miskwaadesi*, "She knows a lot about turtles. She told me that turtle families have specific needs for food, water, shelter, and space. Some of their needs are similar, but



each member of the turtle family is unique and has a special place, responsibility, and role. Sometimes, more than one turtle family will live in a wetland," said Nokomis Annie.

"I am pleased your Auntie Jan knows so much about my turtle family!" said *Miskwaadesi*. "Those of us who wear the colours of *Miskwaadesi* only like to eat plants and seeds, tiny water plants, little minnows, snails, tadpoles, worms, and sometimes little insects found along the shore," the old turtle shared.

"My family can only live in marshes, ponds, and bays that have rocks and logs where we can bask in the sun to soak up its warm rays. I did not start making nests until I was ten years old. When it was time to lay eggs, I returned to my nesting area near the shoreline. My hatchlings climbed out of the nest and hurried back to the *nibiing*. When they hatch they need to find shelter in the water and plants to be safe from the herons, raccoons, and big fish who like to eat them." Nokomis Annie thought about the eggs she saved last year by placing a protective covering over them. She hoped that most of those turtle babies survived.



Miskwaadesi continued to explain to Nokomis Annie, "One of the responsibilities carried on by my turtle babies is to ensure that *nibi* in the marsh is clean and safe. We are also responsible for bringing the message of changing seasons to other animals and plants which live in the wetlands. The Painted turtle is one of the first turtles to hibernate in autumn. I think that is why my shell has those pretty, fall leaf colours on it! I still need plenty of space to live, sunning logs, and rocks to warm my body after the long winter. I communicate with the Creator and all other plants and animals in the wetland."

"Did you know that if my environment is healthy, some of my cousins can live to be over one hundred years old?" *Miskwaadesi* asked. "However, many of my family members are not living as long anymore. Changes in the marsh are making it difficult for us. You know, Nokomis Annie, when you were a little girl, you could not sit on that *Mishomis* rock where you are sitting now because it was under *nibi*! The marsh has been shrinking in size and that means every living thing has less space to live. Where did all the *nibi* go?" *Miskwaadesi* asked in a troubled voice.



"The *nibi* is warmer than it used to be and it is not as good to drink. I am trying hard to keep *nibi* clean but there used to be many more turtles to help. Now there are only a few cousins and myself. We cannot keep up with all the work that must be done." *Miskwaadesi* blinked, snapped at a damselfly that landed near the edge of *nibi*, and slowly turned away from the shore.

"My *fifth challenge* asked you to find out what turtles need to survive. What does a healthy habitat look like? Do you think the habitat in your community is healthy for you and me?" *Miskwaadesi* asked.

Nokomis Annie thought about *Miskwaadesi's* words as the old turtle slipped quietly into *nibi*. She watched as *Miskwaadesi* swam out of sight, leaving behind ripples in the water and time to think about the teaching which was shared. She wondered what happened to the *nibi*. Where did it go? What might happen if *Miskwaadesi* and her turtle cousins are gone? How are we to keep our obligation to *Gzhe Minidoo*? Who will keep *nibi* clean in the wetland? She got up slowly and walked back to the house. Nokomis Annie had a lot to think about.