

DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT TROUBLE AT TURTLE POND

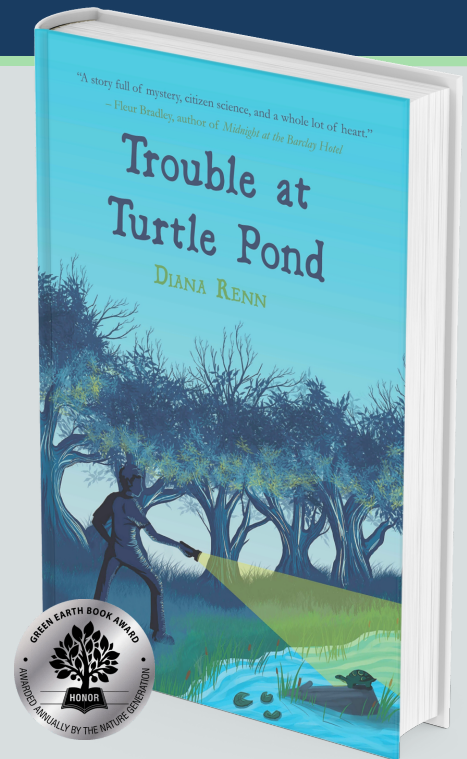
When eleven-year-old Miles moves to Marsh Hollow, he's desperate for a fresh start. At his last school, his ADHD-related challenges earned him a reputation as a troublemaker and cost him his friends, especially after he lost a beloved class pet.

With just one chance to make a first impression, "Mayhem Miles" is determined to do something great in this town, like solving a mystery. After witnessing people burying something in his neighbor's backyard one night, he's sure there's trouble—and this time, it's not his fault.

When his other neighbor, Pia, invites him to join the Backyard Rangers to help protect endangered turtles at the pond behind his house, Miles knows this is his chance to investigate. He stumbles on clues that point to wildlife poaching. Sabotaged turtle traps, stolen eggs, and kidnapped hatchlings put the fragile turtle population at risk.

Miles and Pia recruit two more rangers to help track a string of suspects, including an obsessive gardener, an eccentric pet shop owner, and the town bully and his drifter uncle. Then the rangers start receiving threatening messages, and an unexpected twist turns suspicion back on Miles. Has his reputation for trouble followed him all the way to Marsh Hollow? It's up to Miles to convince his new friends that he's not who they think he is, and to stop the turtle crimes before more turtles—and people—get hurt.

A friendship-centered eco-mystery, *Trouble at Turtle Pond* celebrates community science, activist kids, and the power of paying attention.



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HONORS AND AWARDS

- A 2023 Green Earth Book Award Honor Book
- A Massachusetts Book Awards "Must-Read"
- A 2023 Children's Book Council Librarian Favorites Winner

Consultants, contributors, and collaborators for this Discussion and Activities Guide: Kimberly Behre Kenna (kimberlybehrekenna.com), Joan Green (greenartlabs.com), Derek Russell [Mentorship Coordinator at Creature Conserve] and Creature Conserve (creatureconserve.com). Thank you to Renee Combs (reneeloveswords.com) for the design of this guide. Special thanks to Gabe Nager for the original box turtle craft!

TROUBLE AT TURTLE POND: DISCUSSION GUIDE

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This middle grade novel (written for ages 8-12) is well suited to the school and library market. With its themes of conservation, community science, and ecology, *Trouble at Turtle Pond* adds an engaging complement to a STEAM curriculum. The novel can also complement an English Language Arts curriculum, as it introduces young readers to the classic elements of mystery novels; the team of young sleuths piece together clues, investigate suspects, and analyze the suspects' means, motives, opportunities, and alibis. Additionally, the novel supports a social-emotional learning curriculum in its exploration of friendship issues, from making new friends to resolving conflicts peacefully. It models mindfulness practices, as the Backyard Rangers engage in sustained observation activities, paying attention to the natural world around them. Finally, the novel speaks to neurodiversity by presenting a sleuth with diagnosed ADHD and a range of other characters who think and see the world a bit differently.

The questions and activities in this guide correlate with common core standards in the United States, though they have not specifically been labeled as such, and the novel and guide can be used by schools or programs internationally. A chart references overlapping curricular areas that are covered by each activity.

Trouble at Turtle Pond has a wider audience beyond the traditional classroom, so this discussion and activities guide is designed with broad application in mind. The novel and this accompanying guide can be used flexibly by environmental education programs, zoos and wildlife sanctuaries, camps, homeschool networks, arts programs, and even families.

Discussion questions can easily convert to writing prompts for informal journaling or for more formal paragraph response assignments. Activities encourage both observation and action, and can be modified for younger and older students.

Even if readers do not live in a neighborhood that happens to have endangered turtles, there may be other creatures or even plants in need of help from humans. Wherever possible in this guide, readers are encouraged to extend the activities and discussion into a consideration of how they apply to their own neighborhoods, communities, or ecosystems. Variations and extensions for activities are provided to encourage field work outside of the classroom.

This reading and discussion guide was developed with guidance from Creature Conserve's mentorship program. The mission of Creature Conserve is to bring artists, creative writers, and scientists together to study, celebrate, and protect animals and their habitats. For more information on Creature Conserve and their programs, please visit them at creatureconserve.com.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Miles's dad has a favorite expression: "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." How does this saying affect Miles at the beginning of the novel? How does Miles gradually change his thinking about it? Do you think Miles's dad changes his mind about this proverb? Why or why not?
- 2) Have you ever felt you had only one chance to make a good first impression? Or have you ever felt you had more than one chance? Share a personal experience that would support or oppose the saying "You never get a second chance to make a first impression."
- 3) Dr. Holmes and her team are working hard to study and take care of the turtles in Marsh Hollow. Pick one of their turtle-helping activities and describe the process step-by-step, including any specific equipment needed. Imagine you are teaching Dr. Holmes's next team of volunteers about this process. Some of the processes you could describe are:
 - How to move a snapping turtle in the road
 - How to track nesting turtles
 - How to protect a turtle nest
 - How to set up a tank or tub for small Blanding's turtles
- 4) Why is Mr. Panek so opposed to having a turtle nest in his yard? Why does he eventually change his mind? Do you think Dr. Holmes's team did a good job convincing him to participate in their program, or could they have done something else to convince him?
- 5) Why is Cooper so hostile toward the Backyard Rangers and the ranger station? How does his attitude toward the ranger work change in the novel? Do you think he might be "ranger material"? Why or why not?
- 6) Although the Blanding's turtles in the novel are in danger from wildlife poachers who wish to sell them illegally, many other threats to their survival are mentioned. What other things put them in danger?













































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- 7) List all the suspects in the turtle crimes (including the actual criminal). For each person, list the crime or crimes they are suspected of carrying out and their possible reason (motive) to commit the crimes. Which person did you most suspect? Why? Were you surprised to learn who was responsible for the turtle crimes? Why or why not?
- 8) What makes each of the Backyard Rangers a good sleuth? What special skill or skills do they bring to the investigation? Do you think any individual Ranger could have solved the mystery, or did it have to be a team effort?
- 9) How do the Backyard Rangers work together? How do they make decisions? What kinds of conflicts arise, and how do they work through them?
- 10) What are some examples of how turtles, plants, and people are connected in the town of Marsh Hollow and in the town's wildlife refuge? What do you think would happen if the turtles eventually all disappeared? What would happen if all the native plants eventually disappeared? What are some ways that people in Marsh Hollow are working to protect the ecosystem?
- 11) The Backyard Rangers work not only for the turtles but also the environment in Marsh Hollow. Discuss the various ways in which they work for the environment in general. Then consider: What do you think a team of Backyard Rangers could do in your neighborhood?
- 12) According to Mr. Panek, why does he work so hard in his garden? What wants to grow in his garden naturally? Do you think he should continue growing the kinds of plants he is growing? Why or why not?
- 13) Miles has ADHD, a condition which can impact people in different ways. How has Miles's ADHD challenged him? How has it helped him?
- 14) Miles's new life in Marsh Hollow is very different from the one he left behind. But some parts of his old life seem to carry over. Compare and contrast his life in Somerville versus Marsh Hollow. Do you think Miles achieved his goal of having a "fresh start"?

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ACTIVITIES

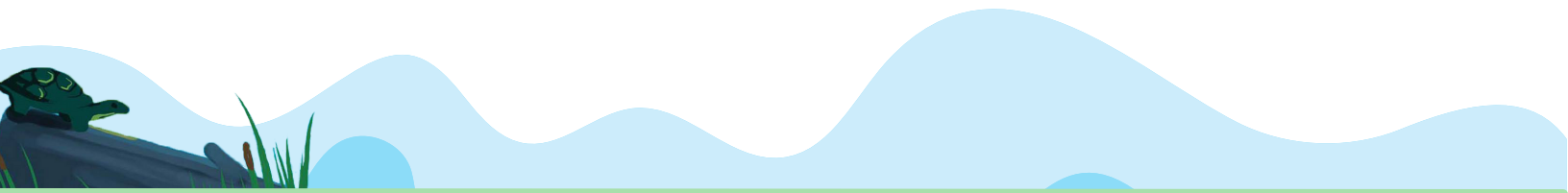
The activities in the following section are designed to let students extend the themes of the book by conducting research, creative projects, or more extensive speaking and writing tasks. They are aligned with curricular areas, which often overlap.

Curriculum Correlations	ELA	Math	Science	Engineering	Visual Arts	Theater Arts
Turning Common Items into Extraordinary Solutions						
Props into Stories about Community Science						
Turtle Dogs: Persuade a Wildlife Biologist!						
Design a Ranger Station						
Community Science Badges						
Mapping Wildlife Habitats and Routes						
Build a Box Turtle						
Field Journal Observations						
Animal Whisperers						
"Critter Crossing" Signs						
Informational Flyers for Community Events						
The "Invasive" Debate						
Trapped!						
Wildlife Detectives						

TURNING COMMON ITEMS INTO EXTRAORDINARY SOLUTIONS

In the novel, Delaney used objects from around her home to make a video surveillance camera with a holder (p. 146-7), and Miles used papier-mache and balloons to make decoy turtle eggs to lure and trick a wildlife poacher (p. 208).

Ask students to come up with other everyday objects that might be combined and transformed into useful creations to help endangered turtles or another endangered species.



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Tip: These objects do not need to be purchased! Encourage students to think about objects in trash or recycling bins that could be used to help solve a problem.

Extension: Have students build prototypes of their creations and present them to the group.

PROPS INTO STORIES ABOUT COMMUNITY SCIENCE

Put objects a wildlife biologist or ranger might use, such as compass, binoculars, map, field notebook, and sun hat in a box. Groups of students must come up with a story about a community scientist or a “Backyard Ranger” who is working for the environment. The story should incorporate all the props.

Variations: To provide more structure, encourage students to focus their story on a problem and a solution involving characters and these props. To provide additional creative challenge, add several unexpected objects as props (such as a dictionary, a jar of food, a shoelace, etc.)

Extension: Have students write the story as a script and perform it.

TURTLE DOGS: PERSUADE A WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST!

In the novel, Miles really wants a dog but would be happy to have a pet turtle – especially a Blanding’s turtle, as they are considered the “dogs of the turtle world” due to their charming appearance. As the novel informs us, however, that endearing quality makes them vulnerable to wildlife poaching and puts them in danger. Some wildlife biologists are combining dogs and turtles in a different way: using trained dogs to help sniff out rare turtles.

Step 1: Have students watch the short video, “Turtle Dogs,” and/or read a short article about them. Then discuss how turtle dogs might be useful in a town like Marsh Hollow.

Video: <https://rebrand.ly/TurtleDogVid>

Article: <https://rebrand.ly/TurtleDogArticle>

Step 2: Have groups present an argument (in writing or orally) to persuade wildlife biologist Dr. Kira Holmes in the novel to train and utilize a turtle dog for her research program. Encourage them to list at least three reasons to support their argument.

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DESIGN A RANGER STATION

Step 1: Have students review the descriptions of the Backyard Rangers' cardboard box ranger station in various places in the novel. There are two versions of the ranger station: The original version (p. 11-12, p. 19, p. 104-106, p. 118, p. 152-154, p. 176-178) and the rebuilt version after the first one is destroyed (p. 186-190, p. 202-204).

Ask them to draw the two versions of the station and use the drawings and the descriptions in the book to compare and contrast. Some specific points of comparison to consider could be:

- What is inside the box?
- How is the box used?
- How is the box transported?
- What materials hold the box together?
- What is the size of the box, and how many people could it hold?

Step 2: Discuss if the newer version of the ranger station is better, and why. What could be done to improve it even more? What goals do they have in mind when thinking about improvement?

Step 3: As a class or in small groups, brainstorm what a durable yet cost-effective ranger station might look like. (Bonus points for using recycled objects!) Students can sketch their favorite idea, being sure to label the structure's measurements. Have students estimate the cost of the structure, as well as the cost of the items they could sell at the ranger station to support community scientist work.

Extension: Have students compare the ranger stations and decide which would be the most profitable (or sustainable) and why.

Extension: Have students actually build their own ranger station.

COMMUNITY SCIENCE BADGES

Although the Backyard Rangers are primarily working for turtles in this novel, they do many other activities to benefit the turtles' habitat, and the environment in general.

Step 1: Have students work in groups to list as many examples of those activities as they can.

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Step 2: Have them design “badges” that Backyard Rangers might earn (similar to Scout badges in the United States). Ask them to list the activities that would enable someone to earn each badge, to help threatened creatures or plants in your own community. Then have them present the badges and ideas to the class.

MAPPING WILDLIFE HABITATS AND ROUTES

Have students draw a map of Marsh Hollow based on information from the book. They can map the entire town, or divide into groups with each group mapping a different area:

- Miles’s street
- The Marsh Hollow Wildlife Refuge
- Main Street
- Marsh Hollow Park (where the July 4th party was held)

For each region, have them choose significant landmarks and label them on the map. Then have them draw X’s or lines to show where turtles or turtle nests were found in that region.

Variation: Have students focus on the maps of Miles’s neighborhood and Turtle Pond, and add to those maps where turtles traveled. (For example, from the pond to a nest in a yard, or across a specific street).

Extension: Have students draw a map of their own neighborhood or an area near the school, and then list the wildlife that are found there. Have them note likely habitats and/or traveling routes for the creatures on their neighborhood maps.

BUILD A BOX TURTLE

Miles’s “box turtles,” made partly from recycled objects, were a big hit at the ranger station and brought in some money to benefit Dr. Holmes’s turtle conservation program. Have students create their own box turtle using the process described in the novel. They can even read the passage where Miles first crafts a box turtle (p. 48-49), and write out their own step-by-step instructions before making it themselves.

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Possible Supplies:

- Small empty, rectangular boxes (empty juice boxes are ideal)
- Masking tape, other colored tape, paper, or paint (to cover the original box designs)
- Markers (to draw shell patterns)
- Pompoms (larger for the head, smaller for legs) OR some other object to attach for head and legs. (Encourage students to find items in recycling bins or even in nature!)
- Googly eyes, if desired. (Again, students can find alternative items in recycling bins or in nature!)
- Glue or tape for attaching eyes, head, limbs.

Variation: Have students design their own turtles – or other creatures – out of recycled objects in a way that is different from Miles’s process, using as many recyclable materials as they can. Ask them to compare their sustainable box turtle with the ones Miles made. Is Miles using any materials in his crafts that might cause environmental harm?

Extension: Have students sell their creations at a craft fair to raise money for a conservation cause! Ask them to estimate the costs of their supplies, set a price for the items, and declare their profits after the fair.

FIELD JOURNAL OBSERVATIONS

Miles spends a lot of time on his stakeout in the ranger station not just looking for wildlife poachers, but also observing wildlife around him. He lists all the creatures he sees in his field notebook. Have students try this exercise in mindfulness and community science:

Step 1: Have students take a field journal to a specific place. It can even be on the school premises, anywhere outside. (Tip: The field journal does not have to be purchased, or fancy; students can tape or staple paper together to make their own!)

Step 2: Have them write down everything they observe for a specific time period, e.g., 15 minutes. They are also welcome to sketch things they observe.

Step 3: Have students compare the wildlife they observed. Discuss how scientists might use information about the number of species in a given place that ordinary citizens provide.

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ANIMAL WHISPERERS

Miles feels a strong connection to animals – mostly dogs, but also turtles; he’s convinced he can hear, or feel, their thoughts. Dr. Holmes and her interns even suggest that Miles might be a turtle whisperer or a “turtle magnet.”

Step 1: Have students debate whether Miles’s ability is real or imagined, using evidence from the novel to support their views.

Step 2: Have them discuss how Miles’s turtle communication skills – whether real or imagined – help him to solve the mystery, giving examples from the book.

Extension: Have students pick an endangered animal they care about and imagine they can hear what that animal thinks. What would that animal say about its plight? What kind of help would it want from humans? Have students share their animal “whispers” in the form of a monologue or a dialogue (with a partner playing the concerned human).

"CRITTER CROSSING" SIGNS

Miles makes Turtle Crossing signs, and the Backyard Rangers post them in the neighborhood, to help people pay attention to nesting turtles and hatchlings. Other creatures may need human help crossing roads too.

Step 1: Have students look up wildlife crossing signs online and list all the different animals they can find on signs. Discuss: What things make the signs stand out and attract community helpers?

Step 2: Have students identify wildlife in their own area that are impacted by roads. Ask them to design a “critter crossing” sign for this animal and present it to the group.

INFORMATIONAL FLYERS FOR COMMUNITY EVENTS

In the novel, the Marsh Hollow Conservation Group hands out flyers at the town fair to educate people about Blanding’s turtles. Have students use Blanding’s turtle facts they learned from the novel, or their own research, to create this pamphlet. Encourage illustration; ideas might include the turtles (with parts labeled), their habitats, hatchlings, a nest of eggs with a nest protector.

Variation: Have students create a flyer for a town fair or other community event that will educate people about a threatened creature or plant in their own area.

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THE "INVASIVE" DEBATE

Some turtles mentioned in the novel are not native to Marsh Hollow; they are considered “invasive” because they were introduced by humans to the area. (For example, pet turtles that people released to the wild). Similarly, the Pulling Together group in the novel works to uproot “weeds” that crowd out the pond – but at the same time, Dr. Holmes’s conservation group plants things like button grass to support the turtle habitat.

Step 1: Have students research plants or animals in their own region that are considered by some to be “invasive.” Are all of these invasive creatures or plants harmful to the local environment? Why or why not? Encourage them to find and list reasons on both sides of the issue as they gather information.

Step 2: Have students pick an invasive plant or animal where there are clear arguments for and against eliminating that invasive. Have students choose a side and stage a debate. They can imagine their goal is to persuade community officials to keep or eliminate the invasive.

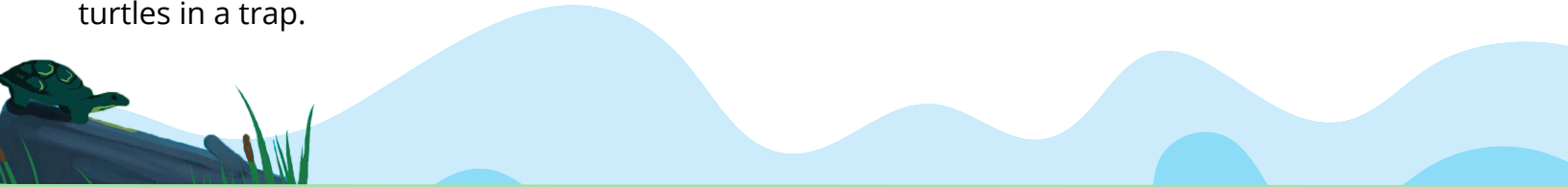
TRAPPED!

In the novel, wildlife biologists use humane traps to catch turtles as part of their research and rehabilitation program. But wildlife poachers are making traps with an entirely different purpose. This activity asks students to consider why trapping may be beneficial for conservation efforts and harmful for other reasons.

Step 1: Have students use descriptions from the novel (p. 97-99) to draw the homemade turtle trap that Miles finds sunk in the pond. Encourage students to label the parts.

Step 2: Have students research turtle traps online and draw a traditional hoop trap (the type that is depicted in the novel), or some other kind of turtle trap. Have them compare the two drawings and discuss. Why do wildlife biologists need to trap turtles on occasion? How well do you think the homemade traps described in the novel would work in real life?

Extension: Ask students to consider the wrong (inhumane) ways to catch turtles with or without a trap. Discussion could include types of harmful materials used in traps, and improper handling of turtles in a trap.



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Variation: Have students pick an animal native to their own region, and research humane versus inhumane ways to trap that animal.

WILDLIFE DETECTIVES

In the novel, Dr. Kira Holmes tells Miles that being a wildlife biologist is like being a detective. Have students research wildlife biologists and what they do. Ask them to list activities that seem “detective-like” in their work.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Carstairs, Sue. *Saving Turtles: A Kid's Guide to Helping Endangered Creatures*. Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, 2014.
- *Climate Kids* (a special project of Climate Science Alliance). Website with further resources and activities related to conservation and climate. Information in English and Spanish. www.climatekids.org/resources
- Grandin, Temple. *The Outdoor Scientist: The Wonder of Observing the Natural World*. NY: Philomel Books, 2021.
- HATCH: Hatchling and Turtle Conservation Through Headstarting. Zoo New England / Zoo New England Field Conservation Program. www.zoonewengland.org/protect/here-in-new-england/turtle-conservation/hatch/
- Laws, John Muir: Nature Stewardship Through Science, Education, and Art. Website with examples and prompts for nature journaling, video tutorials, more teacher resources. www.johnmuirlaws.com
- Montgomery, Sy and Matt Patterson. *The Book of Turtles*. Clarion Books, 2023.
- Montgomery, Sy. *Of Time and Turtles: Mending the World, Shell by Shattered Shell*. Deckle Edge, 2023.

Diana is featured on TeachingBooks.com, where you can hear her talking about the backstory behind *Trouble at Turtle Pond*: how her community science work with Blanding's Turtles inspired her to write this novel, and why she chose to write a mystery about endangered turtles.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Renn is the author of the middle grade eco-mysteries *Trouble at Turtle Pond* and *The Owl Prowl Mystery* (Fitzroy Books / Regal House), as well as three YA mysteries: *Tokyo Heist*, *Latitude Zero*, and *Blue Voyage* (Viking/ Penguin Random House). Diana has also worked in educational publishing and taught ESOL, writing, and literature. Originally from Seattle, Washington, she now lives in Concord, Massachusetts in a neighborhood she shares with turtles and owls, some of whom have inspired her books. Visit her online at dianarennbooks.com and on Instagram at @dianarennbooks.

