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RATTLESNAKE ROUNDUPS

A DIRTY LITTLE SECRET

KILLING EVENTS ENDANGER ANIMALS
AND THE ENVIRONMENT

BY KATIE MORELL



Robert Mendyk was the kind of kid that loved **SNAKES, FROGS AND LIZARDS.**

He would race home from school every day to play in the dirt and subscribed to several animal magazines to learn about species not native near his home in Long Island, N.Y. One day in the early 1990s, at just 11 years old, he came home, opened a reptile magazine and saw several photos that horrified him.

“The article was about rattlesnake roundups. It was the first time I’d ever heard of them, and I remember seeing graphic pictures of decapitated rattlesnakes, guys making a spectacle out of the snakes and piles of rattlesnakes in unhealthy conditions,” he said. “I couldn’t believe it.”

Mendyk, now 35 years old, cares for and protects reptiles and amphibians in his role as supervisor of herpetology at the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens in Jacksonville, Fla. But, like Mendyk as a child, many people are still unfamiliar with the concept of rattlesnake roundups.

So, what are they and why do they exist?

Introducing Roundups

Rattlesnake roundups started 50-60 years ago in states like Texas and Oklahoma and were advertised as events to help control snake populations and protect livestock and children. What started as a niche event spread quickly, and states including Alabama, Georgia and Pennsylvania started hosting their own roundups.

Activities at many of these festival-style events (some of which include beauty pageants and a variety of vendors) range from skinning

snakes alive and chopping their heads off, to lighting pits of live snakes on fire and shooting them in the heads with nail guns. The largest rattlesnake roundup happens every March in Sweetwater, Texas, and at the event, small children dip their hands in the blood from freshly killed snakes to make artwork.

Snakes are “milked” for venom at several roundups, an activity billed as vital to create drugs for cancer research and anti-venom for snakebites.

While word of roundups hasn’t spread to every corner of the U.S., the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and other animal welfare groups have perked up to them over the past 25 years with a mix of confusion, anger and concern. In March 1999, AZA made its opinion known by releasing the following position statement:

The AZA condemns the cruel and ecologically destructive practice of rattlesnake roundups and encourages its member institutions to actively oppose such activity through public education and the support of relevant legislation.

Increased attention has resulted in the scrutiny of the claims around each roundup, specifically around milking demonstrations.

“There are legitimate milking laboratories, where scientists milk venom out of snakes and that venom is used for things like anti-venom and cancer drugs, but none of that venom comes from rattlesnake roundups,” said Ruston Hartdegen, curator of herpetology at the Dallas Zoo in Dallas, Texas. “We’ve reached out to all



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of the manufacturers who make these drugs, and none of them will confirm that they use venom from roundups because the snakes there are stored in inhumane conditions and the milking isn't done in a sterile environment.”

Environmental Concerns and Failure of the Gassing Ban

Rattlesnake roundups have struck a chord even in people who don't like snakes because of negative environmental impacts associated with the events. Rattlesnake hunters are a huge part of roundups and, especially for some of the largest events, are asked to corral thousands of snakes by a certain date. Most roundups take place in the late winter/early spring, which means hunters find and collect the snakes in their dens.

In places like Texas, hunters have been known to pour gasoline into rattlesnake dens to drive them out for capture. The problem

is that rattlesnakes—specifically the Western diamondback rattlesnake, which is used in Texas roundups—shares a den with more than 350 species. Animal welfare organizations have been working hard to legalize a ban on the gassing of rattlesnake dens.

A few years ago an advisory group was formed to determine if the ban was necessary, and on 24 October 2016, John M. Davis, wildlife diversity program director with the Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPW) Department, sent out an email with the following message to a select number of people who had expressed interest in the issue:

“The TPW Commission has decided that, at this time, there is insufficient support from legislative oversight or the potentially regulated community for the department to move forward with regulating the use of gasoline to collect rattlesnakes. TPWD staff still believe that there are better options for collecting snakes that do not adversely impact non-target species, and we will continue to work with the snake collecting community to develop and implement best practices that reduce potential impacts to these species.”

While deeply disappointed, Hartdegen isn't surprised. “I grew up in Texas, so this is not shocking, but I thought that people cared enough to say that pouring gasoline into the ground should be against the law,” he said. “Enforcement would have been difficult, but it would have been a first step. At the same time, them doing this sheds more light on the subject, which means that maybe it will eventually get kicked back when enough people outside the state become infuriated by it.”

Diamondback rattlesnake
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A snake handler at the world's largest rattlesnake roundup in Sweetwater, Texas.

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**The Argument for Roundups
and the Concept of Conversion**

Economic impact is the main reason rattlesnake roundups still exist. In 2015 alone, the Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup brought a reported \$8.4 million into the local economy—a huge boon to the rural, 10,000-person community. Several roundups donate money to local charities. The events provide jobs for residents and serve as a cultural touchstone for recent generations.

Roundup organizers have long opposed welfare organizations asking them to shut down, but in 2012, something interesting happened: another one of the country's largest roundup—located in Claxton, Ga.,—converted



and one of the former venom milkers sued me, but it ended up getting thrown out,” said Jensen, adding that the DNR has also been successful in convincing the organizers of a former roundup in Fitzgerald, Ga., to convert the event to a wild chicken festival.

“Several zoos supported the Claxton roundup conversion; we are planning to go to the roundup in 2017,” said Mendyk. “I’m hoping the organizations in Texas will put an end to roundups, change opinions and have those events transferred over to festivals.”

AZA

The number of rattlesnake roundups has declined in recent years, but there are still several of them occurring in Texas, Oklahoma, Alabama, Georgia and Pennsylvania. And while AZA-accredited facilities aren’t outright fighting the events, member organizations are trying to celebrate biodiversity and teach the public about snakes with the introduction of events like the Lone Star Rattlesnake Days in Round Rock, Texas, near Austin.

“Our first one was in spring 2016,” said Hartdegen. “It was a two-day event during which we brought in live animals from several zoos. I work with the Rattlesnake Preservation Trust, and our goal with the event is to spread information about snakes and provide an alternative, no-kill event to roundups.”

Nearly 200 miles north in Dallas, Texas, Whitney Rogers is working to educate students from schools nationwide on the beauty of rattlesnakes. As ScienceCast Coordinator at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science, she collaborates yearly with the Dallas Zoo on a video course titled Rattlesnake Debunked.

“A few years ago, we saw a long distance learning program sponsored by the people who put on the Sweetwater Roundup, and we decided to do the opposite—to do our own program based on natural history and the biology of rattlesnakes to counteract their program,” she said.

its event to a rattlesnake and wildlife festival and took the “roundup” part out of it.

“We started talking to the organizers of the Claxton roundup in the late 1990s and they weren’t interested in changing, but over the years we made the case that changing the roundup to a no-kill event wouldn’t hurt their bottom line; it would actually boost it,” said John Jensen, senior wildlife biologist with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). “It ended up doing just that. They have a very successful event now.”

Several years later, the group came around, but not without some serious pushback.

“The president of the Evans County Wildlife Club, which puts on the event, got death threats

Starting in 2014, Rogers partnered with experts at the Dallas Zoo to offer a video class to students on the history and biology of rattlesnakes. “We had 800 students tune in from places like New York, Florida and Wisconsin,” she said. “In 2016, we had 638 students participate in the 45-minute class.”

Everybody Can Make a Difference

AZA-accredited facilities outside of the roundup states can still do a lot to help put an end these events. “It is important to use our audience of visitors to tell everybody what is going on,” said Hartdegen.

Vicky Poole, assistant curator of ectotherms at the Fort Worth Zoo in Fort Worth, Texas, encourages AZA-member facilities to get involved in future Lone Star Rattlesnake Days. “Last year we had people from 11 AZA-accredited facilities fly in and help out,” she said. “It is all about advocacy and awareness. We all need to show up to help be a part of an effort that can change people’s perceptions.”

Can the public do anything to help? Absolutely. Hartdegen recommends contacting legislators if you live in a participating state. “If you don’t live in a state that has roundups, write in to the Texas Parks and Wildlife and petition them,” he said. “If the national opinion is that this is ridiculous, it will have an impact. Right now, it is a dirty little secret.”

Katie Morell is a writer based in San Francisco, Calif.