

The Plight of the Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake: The Inhumanity of Rattlesnake Roundups

We would all like to think that animal suffering occurs unintentionally, on a small scale, and most of all, lacks the support of the public. Unfortunately, this is not the case for the *Crotalus adamanteus*, or more commonly known as the Eastern diamondback rattlesnake, which is exploited at rattlesnake roundups. At these roundups, hundreds of these rattlesnakes are captured and eventually killed or mistreated in competitive events that blatantly “violate the basic principles of wildlife management and humane treatment of animals” (“Rattlesnake”, 2008). Troublingly, rattlesnake’s suffering does not begin and end at these roundups. In fact, long before the roundups begin, hunters can be found sweeping the countryside gassing out the rattlesnakes. The inhumane treatment that the Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes face must be dealt with immediately by raising awareness and putting a halt to the roundups once and for all.

During the winter, Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes tend to hibernate in gopher tortoise burrows (also known as hibernaculas) (“Northern”). This period of inactivity has proven to be a prime time for hunters to begin capturing the rattlesnakes. The most common method of collecting the snakes is through a process known as gassing. This method makes use of gasoline or other toxic chemicals which are sprayed into the hibernaculas driving the snakes out of the burrow (“Environmental”). The gasoline can also be poured into the burrow to create fumes which irritate the rattlesnakes causing them to take refuge at the surface. Those that escape are then captured while the others die underground. A study focused on Florida pine snakes found that when the snakes are subjected to gasoline fumes, they die within 24 hours (Speake). If the results of this study are cross-applied to Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, then the rattlesnakes that actually make it to the roundups consist of only a small percentage of those that are harmed and even killed along the way. Due to the inadequate record keeping of rattlesnake hunters, it is difficult to determine the effect of gassing on the rattlesnake population. It is believed that from

the decreasing number of rattlesnakes brought to the roundups, the rattlesnake population must also be decreasing (Adams). The assumption here is that hunters are having a hard time finding rattlesnakes to collect because of their diminishing numbers.

The process of gassing not only has immediate effects on the rattlesnakes inhabiting the hibernacula, but on the habitat and future generations of snakes as well. When the gas seeps into the soil, these burrows become uninhabitable and can remain unoccupied for up to two years (Jones). This disturbance can cause the rattlesnakes to abandon an area for up to five years (“Harmful”). Contaminated burrows can pollute the groundwater driving the rattlesnakes out of their habitat. Gassing also harms nontarget species such as the gopher tortoise, raccoons and opossums (“Environmental”). Gassing can dangerously hinder the ecological functions of the organisms in an area. In many regions, rattlesnakes are the main predator of rodents and when the rattlesnakes are taken away, the rodents can overrun the area (Kaplan). Population explosion and crash is well documented proving that these rattlesnakes are necessary to keep the population in check.

Of the 125,000 rattlesnakes harvested yearly, about 15% are intentionally killed at roundups (Mushinsky). Prior to their death, however, the rattlesnakes are harassed in events such as the “sacking” contest and daredevil shows. The snakes are sacked by folding them nearly in half, then jamming them into bags. Usually the team with the most sacked snakes wins. Each snake involved in this event would be sacked about 15 times throughout the roundup. Daredevil shows include climbing into a sleeping bag containing rattlesnakes, walking barefoot through rattlesnakes, and antagonizing the snakes into biting one’s boots (“Harmful”). At the end of these roundups, the snakes are left in an extremely poor condition often with broken ribs and jaws. The rattlesnakes brought to the roundups are never returned to the wild; once they are exploited for the public’s entertainment, their bodies are processed and used for all kinds of products (“Rattlesnake”, 1996-2008). In an effort to justify these roundups, ranchers claim that it is a way

to control the rattlesnake population and to decrease the number of rattlesnake bites. The truth is, rattlesnake roundups may actually increase the number of bites. In fact, during the daredevil shows, people are often bitten, as can be expected, since the snakes are simply trying to defend themselves.

We cannot allow this cruelty to continue; the Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes clearly need our help. The roundups are allowed to continue to this day because people do not understand or are unaware of the hardships the rattlesnakes face. Therefore, we must first understand the plight of rattlesnakes before we can ever hope to do something about the current situation.

These roundups were initially meant to get rid of rattlesnakes but now they are largely used to generate profit. Proceeds from the roundups go to organizations such as Boy and Girl Scouts, Special Olympics, and the American Red Cross (Wilheim). Although these organizations sponsor and promote good causes, supporting them also means supporting rattlesnake roundups. These organizations must be made aware of the cruelty that takes place before and during these roundups. We must urge them to withdraw from accepting any money generated from roundups. Everyone, especially those who are involved in such organizations, should speak up in order to give a voice to the rattlesnakes. We should follow in the foot-steps of Jeremy Wilson, reporter for the "Your Abilene Online Reporternews". Wilson expresses the inhumanity that the rattlesnakes face in his article, "Rattlesnake Roundups are Cruel" (Wilson).

Laws against animal cruelty range far and wide and yet they fail to encompass rattlesnakes. Legislation protecting rattlesnakes must be passed in order to keep the Eastern diamondback rattlesnake from extinction. Currently there is a CITES II Rattlesnake Proposal in effect that vouches for the inclusion of the species *C. adamanteus* under Appendix II of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) (Silver). Appendix II lists species that are not yet threatened with extinction but may become so if their

trade is not closely regulated. Listing the Eastern diamondback rattlesnake in CITES will monitor trade, ensure the legality of any and all actions taken with respect to the Eastern diamondback rattlesnake and protect the environment.

Rattlesnake roundups have been around since the 1920's. Getting rid of this age-old tradition will not be an easy task and will be opposed on many levels by rattlesnake aficionados. We must compromise: satisfy those with a rattlesnake-fixation and end rattlesnake cruelty. To do this, we should follow the example set by San Antonio, Florida, in Pasco County (Beck). Here, the rattlesnake roundup has evolved into a Rattlesnake Festival. At this event, about a dozen well-cared for rattlesnakes are featured in educational programs ranging from arts and crafts, to a petting farm. In 1997 Pasco County raised \$7,500 for local nonprofit groups. Unlike roundups, festivals promote the well-being of the snakes. This festival teaches people to respect nature and its animals, that snakes are not inherently bad animals and deserve to be killed. If this change is made in the seven states that currently host rattlesnake roundups, then the Eastern diamondback rattlesnake may have a chance of survival and may be restored to its proper environment.

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