

**A Case Study on Rattlesnake Gassing
for the World's Largest Rattlesnake Roundup in Sweetwater, TX**

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Abstract

This case study is about a controversial issue pertaining to a hunting technique called “gassing,” which is used to capture rattlesnakes that are presented and used for the annual Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup.

Introduction

In the West Texas town of Sweetwater there has been a long-standing tradition of the annual Rattlesnake Roundup. Every year, the town holds a roundup for the most snakes and longest snake captured. At this Rattlesnake Roundup, thousands of pounds of snakes are displayed during the three-day event at the Nolan Coliseum for the public to attend. The Roundup brings in many visitors and a substantial amount of income to the city. However, many people don’t realize that when the hunters hunt for the snakes, they use gasoline to spray into the dens to force the snakes out.

This practice is already banned from many states and is harmful to the wildlife and environment. In the last decade many roundup organizations have altered their message to the public.

Solution

There are other roundups that have had great success at changing their events to non-kill and more of an educational experience. Roundups are still including rattlesnakes, though just without the traditional slaughtering and skinning of the snakes. The event should still be held but with more emphasis on education and less on just killing these western diamondback snakes.¹

Evaluation

Having the right information to present to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) can make a change. However, the Sweetwater Jaycees have convinced the department and state that the population of rattlesnakes needs to be controlled. The state and TPWD have also had studies and information presented to them indicating that gassing is harmful, but has been overturned (“Rattlesnakes and Zoos,” 2017, pp. 888-889).

Recommendation

The Sweetwater Roundup does not have any limitations on the number of rattlesnakes they capture. Any other game hunting and fishing has limitations. Setting a limitation to even the number that is hunted will reduce the number of gassed dens. The public also needs to be aware of this hunting method and how it affects the ecosystem. Gassing is harmful not only to the rattlesnakes but also to many other species with which they share their environment.

¹ Different sources spell the snake’s name in various ways. Some sources spell it “Western Diamondback,” while other sources spell it “Western diamondback.” When I refer to “western diamondback,” I will follow the Merriam-Webster Dictionary and spell both words in lower case. If quotations refer to the snake, I will retain their spelling choice. I will follow the same practice when “eastern diamondback” is used.

Introduction

Every year in March, Sweetwater, Texas holds its annual main event: The World's Largest Rattlesnake Roundup. Thousands of western diamondback snakes are killed at this festival for the public to see (MacCormack, 2018, para. 11). The rattlesnake hunters use gasoline to spray in the snakes' dens to flush them out. This is a hunting technique called "gassing" (Scudder, 2018, para. 9). Many of the Sweetwater Jaycees, the hunters, use this method of hunting because gassing is a legal hunting method in Texas (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Garden Sprayer Being Used for Gassing a Snake Den



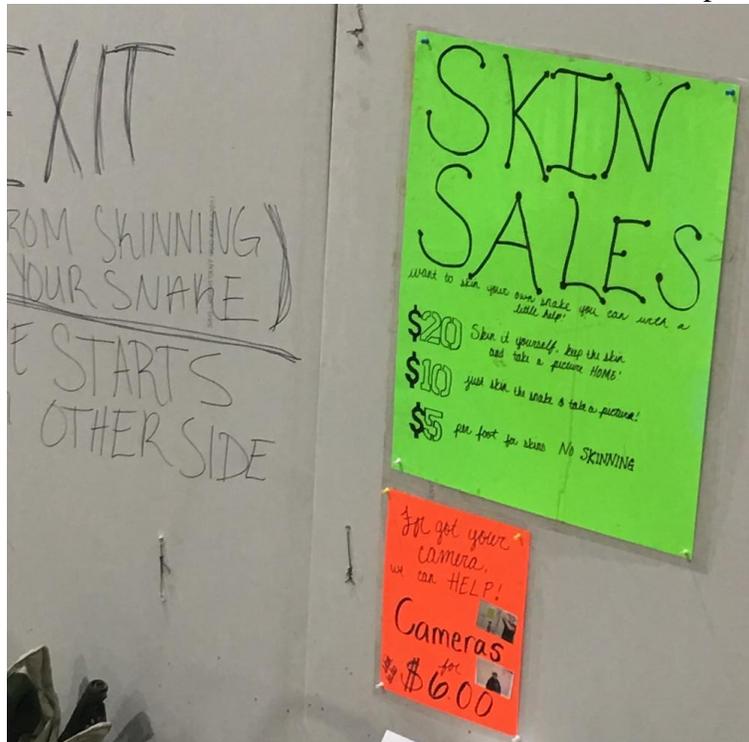
(Scudder, 2018)

Just on the other side of the Mississippi River, the same type of traditional roundups has taken place in Alabama and Georgia (Means, 2009, p. 132). Roundups for the eastern diamondback rattlesnakes began in 1958 in Geneva, Alabama, after a newspaper article described a technique for evicting rattlesnakes from burrows by blowing gasoline fumes into them (Means, 2009, p. 132). Gassing has been practiced for many years.

In Texas, Sweetwater, with a population of approximately 10,500 (United States, 2018), holds this community-supported annual event. The people of Sweetwater depend highly on the income from this festival, and "according to a 2015 economic impact analysis conducted for the town[,] ... the Rattlesnake Roundup generates \$8.4 million in economic activity in Sweetwater every year" (Schipani, 2018, para. 10).

One of the main attractions at the Roundup is the “Skinning Pit,” where the public can pay \$20 to skin a snake, keep the skin and take a photo (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Sign of Snake Sales
at the 2019 Sweetwater, Texas Rattlesnake Roundup



(courtesy of the author, 10 March 2019)

The City of Sweetwater can still bring in income to the community without the cruel use of gas to draw the rattlesnakes from their dens.

Snakes should be protected and unharmed, just like any other animal. The Roundup is a concern because people have made a weekend event over the slaughtering of these snakes. There are other species of wildlife that live in the snake’s dens: “not just snakes, but foxes, burrowing owls and toads can be killed when snake dens are gassed” (“Thousands Push Texas,” 2017, para. 5). Hunting snakes by gassing them does no good for the other wildlife or for the environment. Being exposed to the gasoline is harmful to all living organisms within range of the rattlesnake’s den.

Why I Am Interested in Solving This Problem

I am concerned about this problem because, as previously stated, using gas is harmful not only to the snakes but to other wildlife with which that the snakes share their habitat. There are certainly other ways to control the snake populations than holding a festival to capture and kill the snakes. The festival can be an educational experience for people to learn more about snakes and get close to them safely.

For instance, the Jaycees milk snakes for venom, which has educational value (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Jaycee Milking Snake for Venom
at the 2019 Sweetwater, Texas Rattlesnake Roundup



(courtesy of the author, 10 March 2019)

Dennis Cumbie (personal communications 10 March 2019) explained what the Roundup does with the venom: “[I]t is donated to universities to use for research.” However, the festival in Sweetwater seems more for entertainment and profit than education (Amarello, 2016, para. 1). In contrast, in recent years, other roundups similar to the one in Sweetwater have started kill-free festivals. The World’s Largest Rattlesnake Roundup in Sweetwater, Texas could easily transition into a kill-free round up.

Methodology

For this case study I used a variety of research sources, which added to my understanding of the problems with rattlesnake roundups as they are currently practiced. The research also provided me with ideas on how to improve the roundups.

Open Access Online News Sources

The following online news sources provided background on the rattlesnake roundups:

- *Dallas News*
- *San Antonio Express-News*
- *Savannahnow*

Non-profit Conservation Organizations

These non-profit conservation organizations focus their main goal on protecting Earth's living organisms and provide factual information from their research to educate others:

- The Center for Biological Diversity
- National Geographic
- Sierra
- Advocates for Snake Preservation

Field Research

On March 10, 2019, I visited Sweetwater, Texas for the last day of the annual three-day event of the World's Largest Rattlesnake Roundup. While there, I spoke to and questioned a few of the Sweetwater Jaycee members.

Photographs. I took photos at the Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup on March 10, 2019. Dr. William Christopher Brown, a Technical and Business Writing instructor at Midland College, also attended and shared his photos with me for this project.

Jaycee A and Jaycee B (names unknown). Jaycee A worked at the rattlesnake souvenir table, which showed a display of all kinds of snake themed souvenirs. Jaycee B worked at the Skinning Pit, decapitating the snakes with a machete before they went to the skinning pit.

Rattlesnake milker. Dennis Cumbie, a lifetime Sweetwater Jaycee member, has worked the "Milking Pit" at the Roundup for many years.

Peer-reviewed Scholarship.

These articles provided scientific research and factual information on the rattlesnake roundups that take place across the southern states:

- *Herpetological Review*
- *Herpetological Conservation and Biology*
- *Amphibian & Reptile Conservation*

Solution

There are many rattlesnake roundups held across the southern states in the U.S. every year. According to the Center for Biological Diversity's website, Alabama, Georgia, Oklahoma and Texas still host these killing contests ("Outlawing Rattlesnake Roundups," n.d., para. 1).

The roundup in Sweetwater offers prizes for the most pounds of snakes captured and the longest snake captured (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Snake Pit at the 2019 Sweetwater, Texas Rattlesnake Roundup



(courtesy of W.C. Brown, 09 March 2019)

Since the Roundup is a contest, it encourages hunters to bring in as many snakes as they can capture from the snakes' hibernating dens.

What Happens at the Rattlesnake Roundup

When the snakes arrive at the Nolan County Coliseum, they are measured, sexed and weighed (see Figure 5 on page 6). The first place prize is \$800 for the most pounds of snakes and \$400 for the longest snake captured ("Snake Hunters," n.d.). The Roundup also purchases the snakes from the hunters for \$6 per pound ("Snake Hunters," n.d.).

Figure 5: Rattlesnake Being Measured
at the 2019 Sweetwater, Texas Rattlesnake Roundup



(courtesy of the author, 10 March 2019)

At the Roundup, they sell the skins and the meat. Figure 6 shows a snake being decapitated.

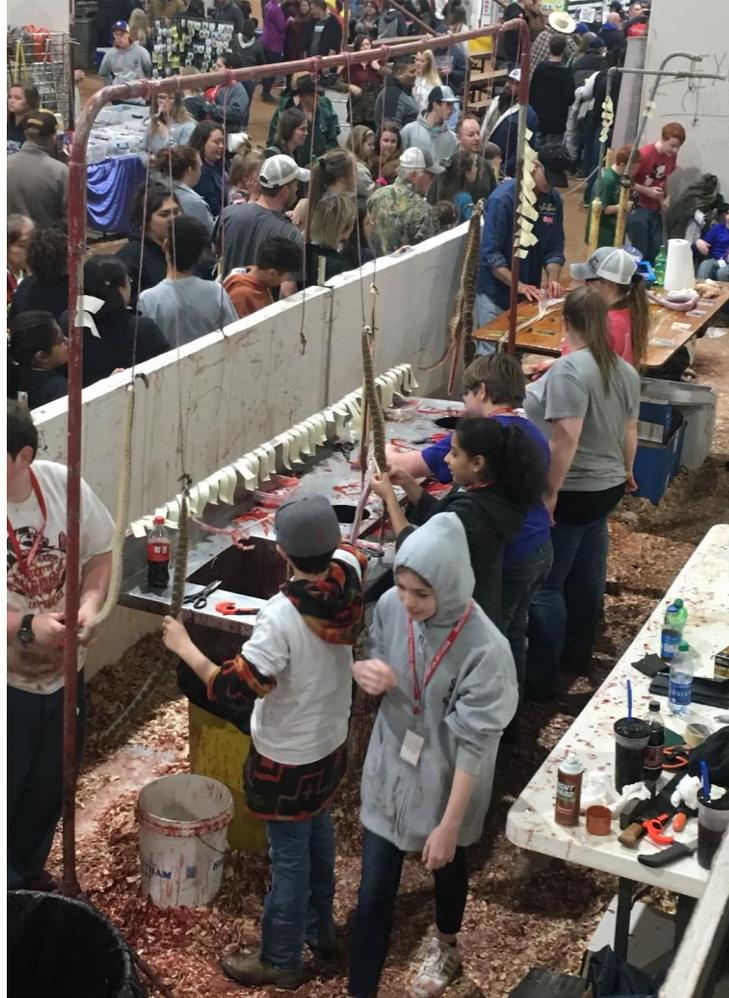
Figure 6: Girl Decapitating a Rattlesnake
at the 2019 Sweetwater, Texas Rattlesnake Roundup



(courtesy of the author, 10 March 2019)

At the “Skinning Pit” the snakes are decapitated with a machete and their heads are put in a small 5 gallon bucket and the snake’s wiggling body is thrown into a 55 gallon container. From there, their bodies are skinned at the next station—see Figure 7.

Figure 7: Rattlesnakes Being Skinned
at the 2019 Sweetwater, Texas Rattlesnake Roundup



(courtesy of the author, 10 March 2019)

This figure shows the main attraction of the Rattlesnake Roundup, skinning the snakes for their meat, skins, and souvenirs.

The limited educational value of the Rattlesnake Roundup is illustrated in Figure 8, where a Jaycee is taunting a snake to thrill the audience.

Figure 8: Rattlesnake Being Taunted by Balloon
at the 2019 Sweetwater, Texas Rattlesnake Roundup



(courtesy of W.C. Brown, 09 March 2019)

This type of show, which is demonstrated at the Safety/Handling Demo area, is cruel to these rattlesnakes. The snake is being agitated by the balloon being waved in front of it. At a roundup in Kansas, “[t]he “Fangs and Rattlers Show” was typical roundup entertainment, the announcer cajoling the crowd while the pit crew performed daredevil tricks, most of which involved unnecessary rough treatment of the animals” (Reber & Reber, 1996, p. 11). There is no educational value in taunting a rattlesnake with a balloon till it strikes and excites the audience.

Growing Awareness of the Problem with Rattlesnake Roundups

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) received a petition in 2013 about ending “gassing,” and the organization took a close look at the research and studies (Scudder, 2018, para. 34). In response, John Davis, an official from TPWD, commented: “[i]nhaling or being exposed to gasoline and the associate fumes (benzene, toluene, etc.) is harmful. Period” (as cited by Scudder, 2018, para. 37). However, since the event in Sweetwater is the largest of its kind, many people defend the Roundup. Through my research, I have found a more convincing way to persuade the agencies that gassing is harmful because it teaches us to be careless of wildlife and their habitat.

A Model for Sweetwater to Follow

However, in the last decade, as stated earlier, some roundups have changed their focus and have successfully become no-kill rattlesnake roundups. Every year, more and more wildlife conservationists fight to change the traditional rattlesnake roundups. For example, in Claxton, Georgia, the president of Evans County Wildlife Club Bruce Purcell said, “We want to shift gears from a rattlesnake roundup where everybody came to see rattlesnakes to a wildlife festival where we’re promoting wildlife and educating people about wildlife and the conservation of wildlife” (as cited in Landers, 2012, para. 16). Since 2012 the wildlife festival in Georgia has continued to practice nokill roundups and focus on educating people.

If the Rattlesnake & Wildlife Festival in Claxton, Georgia has been successful in changing its longtime traditional rattlesnake roundup, then it is possible to do the same with the World’s Largest Rattlesnake Roundup in Sweetwater, Texas. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, the state of Georgia had only one remaining city, Whigham, holding traditional rattlesnake roundups; the other roundups had been replaced by wildlife-friendly festivals where no snakes are captured and sold for venom, meat or skins (“More Than 44,000,” 2017, para. 1). In Georgia, many wildlife groups and lobbyists have successfully used their petitions of facts and information to make a change in rattlesnake roundups.

People are becoming more aware of these particular roundups are cruel to rattlesnakes. Even though the “organizers claim that the events provide environmental education, no meaningful wildlife education-emphasizing the importance of saving native species-is provided” (“Outlawing Rattlesnake Roundups,” n.d., para. 4). If Georgia can put a stop to these inhumane roundups, so can Texas.

Evaluation

There is a possible solution to changing the tradition of the Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department needs to educate people about these western diamondback rattlesnakes before they are captured and slaughtered for entertainment.

Possible Weaknesses

Animal activists have already brought up this issue up to Texas Parks and Wildlife, but TPWD has stated that it doesn’t have enough valid information to shut down the Roundup:

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. The TPWD staff still believe that there are better options for collecting snakes that do not adversely impact non-target species, and ... will continue to work with the snake collecting community to develop and implement best practices that reduce potential impacts to these species. (as cited in “Rattlesnakes and Zoos,” 2017, pp. 888-889)

The people of Sweetwater are highly defensive when it comes to altering their Roundup in anyway, but they also know that there are organizations trying to shut it down. I attended the 2019 Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup. While I was looking at a table full of rattlesnake souvenirs, I overheard a long time Jaycee, Jaycee A² (personal communications, 10 March 2019), covered in rattlesnake attire and tending to the merchandise, talking to another retired Jaycee (see Figure 9 for an example of a souvenir from the Rattlesnake Roundup). He explained how the Roundup has changed over the years and how it is not the same because the TPWD have been trying to shut it down.

Figure 9: Picture of a Souvenir from the 2019 Sweetwater, Texas Rattlesnake Roundup



(courtesy of W.C. Brown, 09 March 2019)

Possible Strengths

If people learn the dangers of gassing rattlesnakes, their minds may be changed about continuing the traditional practices of the Rattlesnake Roundup. I didn't learn about this technique until I began conducting research for this case study. I had known about the Sweetwater Roundup, but not the hunting details. Once more people are aware of the dangerous effects of gassing rattlesnakes, they might reconsider attending the Roundups and adopt a different view.

As noted, other states have successfully banned gassing and the traditional roundup all-together. These roundups have become educational and still provide the opportunity to see rattlesnakes up close.

Ethics of the Precedent

Although TPWD has declined to ban gassing, animal activists have created online petitions to increase pressure to ban gassing ("Stop Snake," 2019, para. 3). By informing and educating more and more people about this hunting method, they have the opportunity to make a change and sign these petitions ("Stop Snake," 2019, para. 3). Using gas isn't only hurting the wildlife but also our environment and contaminating our water systems.

² For this report Jaycee A's name is unknown; therefore, he will be referred to as Jaycee A. I did not personally speak to Jaycee A. He was speaking publicly to others.

Recommendation

Setting limits to the “contest” could be a start. For example, setting a limit to the number of snakes captured would decrease the number of gassings. The Sweetwater Roundup has no restrictions on how many pounds of snakes hunters can bring in. In fact, “[i]n 2016, the festival took in a record haul of 24,262 pounds of rattlesnakes” (Schipani, 2018, para. 11) (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Rattlesnake Totals
at the 2019 Sweetwater, Texas Rattlesnake Roundup

Date	Daily Totals	Team name	Team total Pounds
3-8	3640	Andy's Pest Troopers	1015
3-9	132	Regulators	732
3-10		Hoover & Luna	578
		Cliff Seekers	244
total	3772	Darrell McIntyre	242
	Snakes loose on floor: 2		

(courtesy of the author, 10 March 2019)

Removing over 24,000 pounds of rattlesnakes has to put an adverse impact on the snake population, although the organization denies such claims. Just as with hunting and fishing, there should be limits to what and how much can be hunted or fished.

The rattlesnakes are caught from areas all the way from the Dallas area to El Paso. If there were a limit to how many each team can capture, then there would be less gassing. The Sweetwater Roundup can still be a family friendly event but with fewer snakes. The Roundup already brings in thousands of pounds, so a few thousand less couldn't make much of a difference. The number of skinned snakes should be limited, and the Roundup organizers should consider displaying more snakes at another Roundup rather than skinning so many. There are other roundups that take place in the state of Texas and some of the Sweetwater snakes could be used for those events. When I attended this event, I stayed for the full day and was able to learn more by talking with some of the Jaycees. At the "Skinning Pit," I asked the Jaycee with the machete how many more snakes remained and what were they going to do with the others snakes that were still alive. Jaycee B³ (personal communication, 10 March 2019) responded that they had about six more snakes left in the 55-gallon container and that the other snakes that were still alive had been purchased by someone for another roundup that doesn't bring in as many as Sweetwater does (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: 55-gallon container with Rattlesnakes at the 2019 Sweetwater, Texas Rattlesnake Roundup



(courtesy of the author, 10 March 2019)

It was interesting to know that not all the snakes are slaughtered there and that some go to other Roundups.

Public Education

Rattlesnakes are dangerous and people need to be aware of them. More education should be provided about rattlesnakes at the Roundup. The current education demonstrated can easily be overlooked given the excitement around the rattlesnake taunting, decapitating, and skinning. For example, when people accidentally encounter a rattlesnake, they would benefit from having some knowledge of what to do in that situation. Viewing rattlesnakes as entertainment doesn't contribute to people's education or safety.

³ For this report Jaycee B's name is unknown; therefore, he will be referred to as Jaycee B.

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