

# Biologist responds to snake story

To the editor:

I was initially encouraged to see yet another article about the internationally threatened eastern massasauga rattlesnake (Mouse Bites Snake) in the Winter 1991-92 issue of *Georgian Bay Today*. In the article, editor Kathy Sutton relates a story told to her by a cottager about the killing of two rattlesnakes by a group of visitors.

Given that GBT had previously published a series of fine articles, written by Bob Johnson of the Metro Toronto Zoo, on the conservation and natural history of rattlesnakes, I expected the current article to be similarly useful and informative.

However, instead of being instructive to the readers of GBT by pointing out the complete inappropriateness of the behaviour of the visitors and condemning their actions, Ms Sutton often directly condones their activities. For example, Ms Sutton (1) relates the cottage owner's disappointment at not being present for the "excitement" of the killing, (2) she appears to support the salvaging of skin from the chopped up snakes for "souvenirs," (3) she suggests that the story is somehow "amusing," and (4) while the rattlesnake did not apparently represent any kind of serious threat to the visitors, destruction of the snakes is justified since "human feelings and needs must prevail over those of a snake."

I have studied the ecology and conservation of massasauga rattlesnakes for the past three years and thus have some understanding of the important issues relating to their decline and future protection. One of the most important threats faced by rattlesnakes (and many other snake species for that matter) is the unwarranted negative image they have in the eyes of the public. An image that often leads to wanton killing of the animals. I believe that the attitudes and actions of those who would kill rattlesnakes in Ontario must be addressed in a proper manner if we are to save our remaining populations.

The facts are that massasauga rattlesnakes are extremely secretive, non-aggressive snakes (e.g. the cottager in the story had never observed any in over 30 years on her island) and do not represent a significant risk to human health and safety if treated with respect. As experienced by the visitors, when disturbed in the wild, rattlesnakes often sound a warning rattle allowing humans ample opportunity to pass them by at a safe distance. The group who killed the legally protected rattlesnakes committed a crime under provincial law and if convicted could have faced fines of up to \$25,000 for each snake. By making light of the actions of the visitors I feel that Ms Sutton's article missed the point and consequently may have been more harmful than useful to the readers of GBT.

On the other hand, the article may be considered informative since it demonstrates just how much work still needs to be done in changing public attitudes if we are to preserve wild populations of rattlesnakes as part of Ontario's natural heritage.

Sincerely,

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*The writer's comments are appreciated. However, the acknowledged "entertainment" aspect of the story was intended to lead the reader to the closing points: that the story was a sad one; the incident would not have occurred had the owner been present; appropriate tools must be available for snake capture and release; and, finally, that we must all "respect this shy reptile's right to live."*

*In all these points, public education is the key. GBT endeavours to promote the preservation of the massasauga rattlesnake through regular features and letters on this page. Responses from readers are always most welcome.*

Kathy Sutton