

21 April 2010

Pssst: Southern rattlesnake roundups under pressure from ecologists to end hunts

Canadian Press

OPP, Ala. - Seventy-five Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes are menacing even locked inside a wooden cage, but the cringe factor is just part of the attraction at the Opp Rattlesnake Rodeo.

For 50 years, hunters have been tromping through piney woods and grassy fields in south Alabama looking for these snakes, which live underground in holes. The ones they find are yanked out and put on display at the two-day festival. Afterward, they're killed.

This year, the writhing, 8-pound snake in handler Scotty Short's grip is part of the rodeo show. Dozens of people gather around with cameras as he holds up the rattler, using a metal hook to expose its long, curved fangs.

Next year, the same reptile's scaly hide might be for sale as a wallet or belt at a souvenir booth. Its severed, dried head or rattles might be trinkets at another display table.

The rattlesnake rodeo has made this sleepy south Alabama town of 6,600 known all over the South - the 50th anniversary event drew about 25,000 people in March. Similar snake roundups are held in more

than two dozen communities from Texas to Pennsylvania.

Supporters say it's all in fun. The hunters get rid of a nuisance to many landowners; people pay to see their catch and learn about rattlers. And then there's the fried rattlesnake on white bread for \$5, paper towel included.

But environmentalists and reptile experts are pushing to end the roundups, particularly in the Southeast. There, they say, Eastern diamondback populations are declining to dangerously low levels, largely because of festivals like the annual hunt in Opp.

Longtime snake hunter Don Childre of Opp doesn't see the harm. Childre said hunters have refined their methods to avoid harming other species that live in the burrows favoured by snakes, and he hasn't seen any decline in the number or size of snakes brought in each year.

"We've hunted the same places for 50 years and still are getting snakes out of them," said Childre. "We could probably get 500 or 600 snakes if we wanted to."

Rattlesnake roundups in two Georgia towns are the only others still held in the Deep South - down from about 50 in the 1960s - and the Center for

Biological Diversity says it's time for those hunts to end, too.

Somehow, Opp just wouldn't be the same without the rodeo.

Located about 20 miles north of the Florida line, Opp is an old railroad town. It held its first rattlesnake rodeo at the urging of a businessman who put on shows at a local restaurant with bears, bobcats and other animals.

The rodeo grew, and a handful of men took on the responsibility of providing the snakes.

For years, the hunters poured small amounts of harmful gasoline into gopher tortoise holes to flush out the snakes that also live in the burrows.

Today, hunters shove stiff plastic tubes into the holes and put the end to an ear to listen for rattling. If they hear a snake, they insert another tube with a treble hook tied to the end to snag.

"Sometimes you'd have to wait for 30 minutes for them to come out with the gas," said Childre, the city planner in Opp when he's not hunting. "This way you can pull 'em right out."

Childre said only a half-dozen or so men actually hunt snakes for the Opp event. Their combined take is usually limited to 100, far fewer than in the past.

Biologist Bruce Means has spent years studying Eastern diamondback snakes, and he's researched the effects of Southern snake roundups by going through old news clippings and the events' own promotional materials.

Means, who teaches at Florida State University, published a report last year that put the effect of the events in stark terms. Looking at the numbers from Opp and three roundups in Georgia, one of which has since ended, he wrote:

"Both numbers of snakes and weights of the largest snakes that participants turned in annually

declined in the last two decades. Statements by roundup officials and rattlesnake hunters support that roundup hunting has depleted local rattlesnake populations and forced hunters to travel further to collect snakes in recent years."

Tierra Curry, a conservation biologist with the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity, gives the Opp event credit for limiting its catch. Eight rattler roundups in Pennsylvania are even better because they release the snakes after catching them, she said.

Attendees of the Opp rodeo didn't

seem too concerned about how the snakes are captured or what happens to them after the show. Billy Garner of Forestdale picks up a stuffed rattlesnake from a sales table and holds it out for his wife Julia to see.

Over at the live snake pen, Cheryl Lombard of Vicksburg, Mich., watches in fascination as a handler picks up a big rattler with a metal hook made from an old golf club.

She wants to try fried snake, but she keeps a distance from the live ones.

"You couldn't pay me to get near one," she said.