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Commentary: Don't let snake rattles in Georgia go silent

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Savannah Morning News file photo
Some things never change at the Claxton Rattlesnake Roundup, even though rattlers are no longer hunted and the event is now a mixture of education and entertainment. One constant is the mixing of snakes (a non-poisonous indigo snake) and 2012 beauty queens, from left, Miss Augusta Teen Ashleigh Proctor, Miss Southeast Georgia Teen Sydney Hillman, Miss Emanuel County Morgan Lothridge, Miss Emanuel Teen Miley Keyton and Miss Golden Isles Alexia Turpin.

By COLLETTE ADKINS GIESE

One of the enduring memories for anyone who ventures out to Whigham in southwest Georgia this weekend for the state's last-remaining annual rattlesnake roundup is likely to be of how few snakes they'll see.

The days when hundreds and hundreds of rattlers would be put on display are long gone.

Some of those who still support the round-ups contend the decline has been caused by a variety of factors, including shorter snake-hunting seasons and the fact that fewer people are participating in the hunts.

What they won't mention is that eastern diamondback rattlesnake populations are fast disappearing from the Southeast due to decades of over-collection and destruction of all but about 3 percent of the snake's traditional longleaf pine habitat.

Despite assertions by many snake hunters that the populations are doing just fine, all the best scientific evidence in recent years suggests quite the opposite.

Even at the Southeast's remaining rattlesnake roundups, the evidence of decline is mounting. The size and numbers of eastern diamondback rattlesnakes targeted by four rattlesnake roundups over the last 25 years reflects a steady decline in the weights of even the prize-winning snakes, according to research by rattlesnake expert, Dr. Bruce Means.

Means also analyzed 50 years of data for the longest running roundups and found the total number of captured rattlesnakes declined by 67 percent in the last two decades.

Rattlesnakes are also declining due to unbribdled agricultural and urban development. Remaining habitat supporting large populations of eastern diamondbacks is now located only in northern Florida and southern Georgia. The

species is likely gone from Louisiana, endangered in North Carolina, and scarce in South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi.

Given the undeniably sad shape of the rattlesnake population, and the fact that rattlesnake hunters continue to remove remaining snakes from the wild, the only reasonable way to stop the population from pushing on toward extinction is Endangered Species Act protections.

That's why the conservation group that I work for asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to provide federal protection for eastern diamondbacks. The wildlife agency found that the snakes may deserve a place on the list of protected species and is conducting a full status review.

With the compelling evidence of the snake's decline, all of Georgia's other roundups have abandoned the inhumane and outdated practice of removing rare rattlers from the wild.

Two years ago, the town of Claxton received a boost in attendance after replacing its roundup with the Claxton Rattlesnake and Wildlife Festival, where no snakes are taken from the wild and killed. Captive rattlesnakes are displayed, along with many other educational wildlife exhibits.

As the avid response to Claxton's wildlife festival demonstrates, the majority of people have no interest in persecuting snakes.

They simply want the privilege of seeing — and learning about — these increasingly rare representatives of our wild natural heritage in an environment that's safe for humans, and for the snakes.