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Advocates for Snake Preservation Launch Campaign to Stop Rattlesnake Slaughter at Roundups

TUCSON, Ariz., March 8 2016 – Advocates for Snake Preservation (ASP), a nonprofit organization dedicated to changing the way people view and treat snakes, today kicked off a formal campaign against the capture and slaughter of rattlesnakes for roundups held in the U.S. South and Southwest.

At these annual festivals, wild rattlesnakes are rounded up by the thousands to be displayed and slaughtered in public spectacles, then rendered into novelty meat, trinkets and folk medicine. ASP and photojournalist Jo-Anne McArthur documented the animal cruelty, suffering, and fear underneath these events promoted as folksy, family-friendly fun. To battle fearmongering and pseudoscience, ASP is leading a group of biologists and conservationists in opposition to roundups.

For photos and videos please see www.rattlesnakeroundups.com.

“At these events it’s common to see snakes swollen and bloody from being restrained or thrown by handlers, dead and dying snakes, snakes too weak or stressed to defend themselves, unsanitary conditions, cruelty, and dangers to the public,” said Melissa Amarello, cofounder and director of education for ASP and an expert in rattlesnake social behavior. “Rattlesnakes rattle when they are terrified, not angry or preparing to attack as many think. The sound of rattling at these roundups is in fact a thousand snakes screaming.”

Roundups primarily target western diamondback rattlesnakes (*Crotalus atrox*) and eastern diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*). Professional hunters, not bound by ‘bag’ or ‘take’ limits, remove snakes from their native habitats and are awarded with cash prizes for bringing in the most and biggest snakes. Most snakes are caught by pouring gasoline into their winter dens, which pollutes surrounding land and water and may impact up to 350 other wildlife species. After capture, snakes are crowded together without food or water for weeks or even months.

In Sweetwater, Texas, home of the Sweetwater Jaycee's World's Largest Rattlesnake Round-Up, audiences watch myth-riddled presentations that demonstrate unsafe handling techniques. Snakes are shot in the head with a bolt gun, decapitated by machete, skinned, and gutted. Their disembodied heads continue gasping, hearts beating, and skinless bodies writhing, long afterward — decapitation is neither a rapid nor humane method of killing reptiles.

Proponents of roundups say they prevent overpopulation and protect people and cattle from death by snakebite. However, there are fewer than five deaths in the U.S. from snakebites annually, including people who refuse treatment, and the USDA’s Cattle Death Loss report has logged no cattle deaths from snakes. Paradoxically, proponents maintain roundups have no effect on local snake populations, making it something of a mystery how they can also alleviate overpopulation.

Science does not support claims that roundups are required to prevent rattlesnake overpopulation. Like other wild animals with natural predators, snake populations are maintained by prey abundance (rodents) and levels of predation and disease. Unlike traditional game hunting, there is no monitoring or reporting to regulate the slaughter of snakes. Biologists and conservationists believe that roundups have contributed to the current decline in eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, which have been proposed for listing under the endangered species act.

“Rattlesnake roundups thrive on an anti-snake brainwashed public all too eager to gloat at the demise of sensitive and sentient animals that peacefully reside in North American dens and brushlands,” said Clifford Warwick, PGDipMedSci CBiol CSci EurProBiol FOCAE FRSB, consultant biologist and medical scientist. “No aspect of snake collection, handling, transport, or storage is considerate or humane.”

“These roundups offer a grotesque social commentary about our disconnect from nature,” said McArthur, an award-winning photojournalist, author and activist. “The festive atmosphere at these events conceals obvious and heinous animal cruelty, and emphasizes the peculiar ways we humans accept it as part of our culture.”

Unlike traditional roundups, some have evolved into festivals that celebrate, rather than harm, rattlesnakes, such as the Rattlesnake & Wildlife Festival in Claxton, Georgia.

“Growing up in the rural south, I recognize the importance of community festivals to our culture and economy,” said Amarello. “But I believe, and Claxton’s festival demonstrates, that giving up snake slaughter does not mean losing our festivals or the income they generate. New traditions celebrating our natural heritage without slaughter are more successful than ever.”

To learn more visit www.rattlesnakeroundups.com.

About Advocates for Snake Preservation

ASP promotes compassionate conservation and coexistence with snakes through science, education, and advocacy. ASP identifies and addresses threats to snakes, conducts research, and dispels myths and misinformation about snakes. Snakes are threatened by many of the same issues that affect all wildlife, including habitat loss, climate change, and disease, but negative attitudes toward snakes may be the biggest barrier to their conservation because it often impedes efforts to address other threats. ASP was founded in 2014 and is based in Tucson, Arizona. For more information visit www.snakes.ngo.