

Snake charmer visits local school

Awareness program part of effort to protect threatened Massasauga rattlesnake

By SCOTT WOODHOUSE
EXPRESS STAFF

The world can be divided into two kinds of people: Those who love snakes and those who hate them.

These fascinating reptiles have received a bum rap ever since that little incident in the Garden of Eden. The result has been the wholesale slaughter of this beautiful and beneficial species, to the point where some, like the eastern massasauga rattlesnake, are threatened with extinction.

Melissa Coady falls into the "loves snakes" category and the Resource Technician from Bruce Peninsula National Park is trying to educate a largely misinformed public about snakes.

Sadly, when she takes her Reptile Species Awareness Program into the schools she hears tales of parents killing snakes with rakes, shovels or whatever weapon they can lay their hands on. Usually the victim is a harmless water snake.

"It's hard to tell kids this age that their parents have done something wrong, so I try to teach them that snakes aren't going to come after them," said Coady.

When she brought "Louis" out of his box last week at St. Vincent Euphrasia Elementary School, the students were wide-eyed and very excited to see a real live rattlesnake slithering across the carpet in front of them - carefully corralled by Coady and her snake hook.

"You can see the snake is pretty docile," she said. "Just by letting the kids see a snake can clear up a lot of misconceptions they have."

Coady, who spent the summer on the Bruce Peninsula catching massasaugas, inserting radio transmitters into them, and tracking their movements, tells her young audience to be very quiet and not make any sudden moves that would scare Louis.

Now that her snakes are hibernating for the winter, she is visiting classrooms throughout Bluewater District, with Louis in tow, to educate students about reptiles in general and the massasauga in particular.

She explains that there are only four isolated populations of the massasauga rattlesnake in Canada: the Bruce, Wainfleet Bog near Welland, the Ojibway Prairie Complex in Windsor, and the largest concentration along the eastern shore of Georgian Bay.

She dispels numerous myths about the rattler: You can't tell how old it is by the number of rattles; it's unable to strike at great distances; snakes are not slimy, they are dry and smooth.

She also notes that only two people have died in Ontario from rattlesnake bites - both were over 40 years ago and in both cases the victim failed to seek medical treatment.



Bruce Peninsula National Park Resource Technician Melissa Coady gently maneuvers Louis, a Massasauga Rattlesnake during a presentation at SVE school last week.

"Rattlesnake bites are really rare," she said.

In fact, most snakebite cases involve males aged 10-29 years, alcohol is usually a factor, and many cases involve "risky and/or dangerous human behaviour." In other words, instead of just leaving the snake alone, they try to catch the snake and end up getting bitten. "I'd be more afraid to drive my car in Toronto than of getting bitten by a rattlesnake," she said.

"Rattlesnakes are shy and retreating beings," explains Coady to the students at SVE. This is proven when the snake keeps trying to move away and hide. It wants nothing to do with the people in the room.

"What do you do if you see a rattlesnake?" she asks the class. "Back-up!"

Coady's work with the park is part of the Eastern Massasauga Recovery Team project, which was formed in response to declining populations of the species in Canada. The team includes biologists, academics, government and park representatives, and zoo officials. The team is working to learn more about the rattlesnake and promote stewardship.

The eastern massasauga rattlesnake was given legal protection through the Ontario Fish and Game Act in May of 1990. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources designated it as threatened in Ontario in 1998.

According to Coady, the snakes face many dangers including loss of habitat.

"Rattlesnakes cannot be relocated because they have a home range of about one kilometre and always hibernate in the same place," she explained. "If they are relocated outside of their home range, they will die."

She also noted that there is an illegal trade in the snakes, but scientists don't know how many are taken annually.

When it comes to interaction with people, rattlesnakes would just as soon "live and let live."

If only the humans would adopt the same attitude.