

Sharing Land with Rattlesnakes

"She never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged, ever surrenders: She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and true courage...she never wounds 'till she has generously given notice, even to her enemy, and cautioned him against the danger of treading on her."

Benjamin Franklin

"We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

Aldo Leopold



Eastern Diamondback: a species unique to the southeast.

"A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these resources, but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state."

Aldo Leopold



Eastern Coral Snake: A secretive and venomous species. Note how the red and yellow bands touch.

SHARING LAND WITH RATTLESNAKES

Minimizing Conflict with Venomous Snakes



How to minimize conflict with ecologically significant, yet potentially dangerous animals

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Respecting the Distance of Unique Species



Canebrake Rattlesnake: one of the more widespread rattlesnake species in the United States.

Rattlesnakes are arguably among the most recognizable venomous snakes and have a long and storied history.

These snakes, which are found only in North and South America, are the subject of much fear and misunderstanding.

Although they play an important role in the environment, they are likely best known for their venomous bite.

These snakes are among the top predators in the habitats where they may be found, influencing populations of rodents and other mammals. Pests such as rats and mice, which have the potential to spread disease and damage crops and stores of food, can be eaten at a rate of 20-30 a year by a single snake.

Some species of venomous snakes are unique to the Southeast. The eastern diamondback is the largest species of rattlesnake in the world and it is known primarily from five southeastern states, plus southern North Carolina and eastern Louisiana. If it disappears from the region, it disappears from the globe.

Medical Benefits

The same chemicals that cause fear in most people may actually end up saving their lives. By studying venom (venom is poison transmitted through a bite), researchers hope to discover medical breakthroughs with implications for humans. This has already met with some success. Captopril, a blood pressure drug, was derived from snake venom research. Drugs derived from southeastern snake venom can treat human illnesses. For example, Integrilin, used to treat acute coronary syndrome, is derived from pigmy rattlesnake venom, a southeast native. Scientists have suggested that future developments may include drugs to treat cancer and heart disease.

DON'T TREAD ON ME

Don't let your Backyard be a Habitat for Snakes



Eastern Diamondback: a species of conservation concern and the largest rattlesnake in the world.

Killing venomous snakes is dangerous. In most cases, if you're close enough to kill the snake, you're close enough to be bitten. It is safer to deter snakes from ever inhabiting your yard in the first place.

Keep your lawn mowed and free of brush piles and debris such as wood piles. Most snakes will feel exposed and vulnerable in open areas and avoid them. Trim hedges and bushes so that they do not reach the ground, this eliminates potential hiding places for snakes.

When you see snakes in their natural setting, such as the woods, please respect their role in the environment and observe from a safe distance.

Watch your hands:

The most important guideline when attempting to minimize conflict between rattlesnakes and people is to keep your distance. Don't put your hands (or feet) where you can't see them.

A snake that is not being harassed is not likely to bite you. Most venomous snake bites occur when a person is attempting to capture or kill a snake. Think before you attempt to handle or disturb a rattlesnake because a bite can be dangerous and costly.

Ask yourself: do you have a valid reason for interacting with this animal?

Watch your step:

Are you working outside in habitats that snakes may prefer? Don't wear sandals if you think that you may be stepping in spots that rattlesnakes may reside. Leather boots are appropriate or you may feel comfortable wearing snake chaps.

Education

Teach your children how to identify and avoid venomous snakes. Pay particular attention to the pattern and coloration of the various species as well as the triangular shaped head that rattlesnakes possess.



Pigmy Rattlesnake: A small rattlesnake species often found in habitats surrounding wetlands. Photo courtesy of Dirk Stevenson.

Remember that the venomous coral snake, which also occurs in the southeast, looks unique. The coral snake does not have a triangular head but has red, yellow and black bands with the red and yellow bands touching. Make sure children understand that it is not safe to handle snakes if they cannot positively identify it. Good resources for snake identification are included below. Emphasize how to appreciate wildlife from a distance and supervise outdoor activities.

Treatment

Each year about 8,000 people in the United States are bitten by venomous snakes. However, between 1960 and 1990, no more than 12 people died in a single year from these bites (a maximum of 0.15%).

If you are bitten by a venomous snake, stay calm and obtain immediate, professional medical attention. If you frequently work outside, you may find it beneficial to create a snake bite plan that details what to do if you, or others, are bitten. Consult a medical professional to help you create this plan. Keep in mind there are many myths regarding how to treat a snakebite; don't attempt to treat it yourself.

For Additional Copies of this Brochure:

The Gopher Tortoise Council:
<http://www.gophertortoiseCouncil.org/>

For More Information About Snakes:

Savannah River Ecological Laboratory:
<http://www.uga.edu/srelherp/>

Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation:
<http://www.parcplace.org/>

Davidson College Snake Identification:
http://www.herpsofnc.org/herps_of_NC/snakes/SnakeID/All.asp