

The Buzz

Advocates *for* Snake Preservation



Changing how people view & treat snakes

Winter 2021 • #08

Changing Fear to Fascination With Familiarity

*"In the end we will conserve only what we love,
we will love only what we understand, and we will
understand only what we are taught."*

Baba Dioum (1968)

*"How do people understand something
that terrifies them?"*

Whitney Barlow Robles 2021

In a recent essay, Robles (2021) details attitudes toward rattlesnakes in the eighteenth century, when Timber Rattlesnakes ranged across the original 13 Colonies. European colonists viewed these large and potentially dangerous beasts as an impediment to expansion, and she documents discussions among naturalists considering the need, and methods, to remove them from nature.

Ironically, while working to eradicate these impressive natives, the magically unassailable reputation of rattlesnakes was co-opted by those seeking independence for the nascent federation. Under the banner of the rattlesnake, colonists both threw off their monarch and mounted campaigns to eradicate this misperceived reptile.



Western Black-tailed Rattlesnake (*Crotalus molossus*)
catching some last rays of the season in a Turpentine Bush.

Persecution and bounties were widespread, even until the middle of the last century, and sadly, many eradication efforts were successful. As settlers continued the westward expansion, into territory of more and different forms of rattlesnakes, they carried with them their rigid intolerances.

The exaggerated threat posed by rattlesnakes (and by affiliation, all snakes) was passed down through the generations. Misapprehensions about snakes still compel their execution, even in wilderness, where any danger posed to humans is easily mitigated by being aware of one's surroundings and staying a few steps away.

Our supporters will understand this particular problem well, but the solution is more complex, as it involves the psychology of changing one's mind about a deeply held belief; studies of humans suggest that supportable facts that refute a belief are treated as a threat by the brain, and may serve to fortify the misapprehension. For some, observing or interacting with a snake may be enough to open the door to a new attitude, an escape from the malignancy of intolerance.

And that's why the focus of ASP's work has always been to make snakes more familiar: through an article in this newsletter, an educational post on Instagram, a video on YouTube, a multimedia presentation at the local library, or an opportunity to meet face-to-face with one of our friendly snake teachers like Pipsqueak. We are always looking for creative ways to get people to let the light in.

Continued inside...

Changing Fear to Fascination With Familiarity *(continued)*

Dr. Emily Taylor is an ASP board member and Professor of Biological Sciences at California Polytechnic State University. Her passion for rattlesnakes often infects her students, who are typically already biologically inclined. Next quarter she's offering a new seminar, "Team Rattlesnake Rebrand," which will engage an interdisciplinary team of students to approach the problem of rattlesnake intolerance from as many angles as possible. Even the title itself connotes a modern approach to an old problem. We're so excited to see the new ideas and approaches they come up with!

Our shared mission, to **change how people view and treat snakes**, will benefit from every tool at our disposal. We know snakes are captivating, and the threat rattlesnakes pose is often overblown. Finding new ways for people to let snakes into their hearts is exciting and vital to helping snakes survive the Global Extinction Crisis threatening all life on our shared planet.

By his own admission, prejudice initially kept one eighteenth century naturalist from pursuing his interest in studying rattlesnakes. But after getting to know some individual snakes, he realized what many of us do: they possess a "considerable share of intelligence" and "showed not any disposition to injure any person" (Benjamin Smith Barton *in* Robles 2021). When real snakes are given the opportunity to eclipse their myth, intolerance wanes and fascination unfolds.

- Jeff Smith & Melissa Amarello, Co-founders, ASP

Robles, Whitney Barlow. 2021. *The Rattlesnake and the Hibernaculum: Animals, Ignorance, and Extinction in the Early American Underworld*. William and Mary Quarterly 78: 3-44.



Jeff & Melissa observing a den, photo by Young Cage.

The glorious, wet monsoon dried up into a warm and sunny autumn. The land is once again alive with invertebrates, baby lizards have made a HUGE comeback, and we've seen so many young snakes, especially rattlesnakes, at dens this year! Seeing the little ones heading into winter fat and happy makes me very happy. ASP had a fantastic year too (see the following page), which wouldn't have been possible without you. Thanks so much for supporting snakes and ASP. Together we can make 2022 another great year for sharing positive stories about snakes.

THANK YOU, for all you do for snakes, every day!

Melissa Amarello

Executive Director, ASP

Be a Snake Hero!

Snakes deserve a voice and together we give them one. **Your gift brings us closer to a world where snakes are respected and appreciated instead of feared and hated.**

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2021 The Year in Snakes

3 Skype a Scientist classes

6 Field trips and snake rescues

134 Hours watched of season one of *Snakes Are Everything!*

6 In-person classroom and library presentations

8 Online classes and workshops

1 Peer-reviewed paper published:
<https://bit.ly/3d1yKNz>



Jaclyn Koczan's class learns about snakes from Melissa through *Skype a Scientist*.



Jeff gives this ASP supporter a closer view of his snake neighbor, a Prairie Rattlesnake.

27,544 People learned about snakes by visiting our website -- 38% more than last year!

17,642 Interactions on Facebook and Instagram

1300 Hours watched on our YouTube channel

1545 People learned how to coexist safely with snakes through our online *Snake Country Survival Guide* and *Snake Country Travel Guide*

YOU made this possible, by donating the most for snake conservation ever:

\$26,899

Looking Ahead

- Season two of *Snakes Are Everything!* Featuring episodes on effective outreach for snakes on social media, the science behind snake translocation, and much more.
- A symposium on outreach and education about Pitvipers.
- Coexistence with snakes in working environments.
- *What would you like to see?* Let us know: info@snakes.ngo



Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake hunting next to a barn with a horse standing nearby.

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Young of the year Rock Rattlesnake (*Crotalus lepidus*) hanging outside a den crevice.

Advocates *for* Snake Preservation

uses science, education, and advocacy to promote compassionate conservation and coexistence with snakes.

Who We Are

- Melissa Amarello, Executive Director
- Jeff Smith, Co-founder, Treasurer
- Steve Marlatt, Chair
- Jesús A. Rivas, PhD, Vice-Chair
- Emily Taylor, PhD, Secretary
- Gordon M. Burghardt, PhD, Director

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When you're done reading The Buzz, please leave it where someone else can read it and learn to love snakes too.

Coffee shops • Libraries • Cafes • Bookshops



Gophersnake (*Pituophis catenifer*) peeking out from his den.