



THE ALAMOGORDO RATTLESNAKE ROUNDUP

A Tradition of Cruelty and Exploitation



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What is a Rattlesnake Roundup?

Rattlesnake roundups have been in existence since the 1920's and currently take place in New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia, Alabama, and Pennsylvania. For these events, "hunters" collect as many rattlesnakes as possible and sell them by the pound to roundup organizers who, in turn, sell them for their skins, meat, gall bladders, heads, and rattles. However, before many of the snakes are slaughtered, they are often piled on top of each other in "snake pits" to be gawked at by spectators. Rattlesnake "handlers" then exaggerate the dangers of such creatures while harassing them, forcing them to strike, picking them up, and using them for tricks.

It is not unusual for rattlesnakes at roundups to be handled inhumanely. The treatment of snakes at roundups in Texas, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania has been documented by herpetologists Fitzgerald and Painter.¹ Various forms of mistreatment have been noted. Snakes are often shaken out of containers, falling several feet to the floor. They are handled roughly while being stretched out for measurement. Overcrowding is a big problem in the pits, and some snakes are crushed under the weight of others. In addition, over half of the injuries documented at roundups are thought to occur prior to the event. Rough handling, stockpiling, and inappropriate transportation of snakes by the hunters are all likely causes.

Snakes at roundups are slaughtered by decapitation. Due to their slow metabolism, this method of killing reptiles is not approved by the American Veterinary Medical Association.² A snake's head and body can remain alive for over an hour after they are separated. In addition, snakes at roundups are often decapitated and skinned in public. This sends a disturbing message to the public, including children, that it is acceptable to treat wildlife so callously.

Unfortunately, "daredevil shows" at roundups do even more to send the wrong message to the public about rattlesnakes. These presentations usually exaggerate the dangers associated with such snakes while saying nothing positive about these unique and ecologically valuable animals. Not only do they prey upon disease-carrying rodents, but they are also a food source for hawks, roadrunners, and other animals.



A snake pit in Sweetwater, Texas. Event organizers claimed there were about 3,000 rattlesnakes in this pen, which measured only 12 feet in diameter. Photo: John Hollister



Public butchering in Sweetwater, Texas. Snakes are often decapitated and skinned while adults and children watch. Photo: John Hollister



Rattlesnakes in the wild are unique and ecologically important. Rattlesnakes at roundups are reduced to body parts in buckets. Photo: John Hollister

1) Fitzgerald, L.A. and C.W. Painter. 1994. A critical evaluation of rattlesnake commercialization: roundups and the rattlesnake trade. A final report submitted to World Wildlife Fund/TRAFFIC (USA). 58 pp.
2) American Veterinary Medical Association. 2001. 2000 Report of the AVMA panel on euthanasia. Journal of AVMA 218(5): 669-696.

THE ALAMOGORDO ROUNDUP

The Alamogordo Rattlesnake Roundup has taken place annually since 1986. About 2000 people attend this event each year, which coincides with a gun and craft show. The organizers of this event profit from the exploitation of our wildlife.

Between 500-1000 snakes are gathered each year for the roundup.³ Although 11 species of rattlesnakes are found in New Mexico, most of those collected are western diamondbacks. The hunting of this species for any commercial purpose, including the roundup, is virtually unregulated by state or federal wildlife agencies. Because of this, the impact of hunting on snake populations is unknown. However, many biologists are concerned that if unregulated hunting continues, rattlesnake populations will suffer.

The treatment of snakes in Alamogordo is no different from most roundups. Fitzgerald and Painter have observed snakes being harassed into defensive coils, kicked across the floor, grabbed, made to strike, and used for tricks.⁴ During the 2003 and 2004 roundups, APNM witnessed the continuous, intentional dropping of snakes. At one point, a snake handler allowed a spectator to hold a coiled rattlesnake. This was dangerous, considering snake handlers have been bitten in Alamogordo



The rattlesnake pit at the Alamogordo roundup. Snakes are sometimes kicked across the floor while coiled in a defensive position. Photo: Las Cruces Reptile Rescue.

in 1989, 1993, 2001 and 2003. Such acts also demonstrate a flagrant disregard for properly educating the public about rattlesnakes.

The main cause of injury to rattlesnakes in Alamogordo is actually due to improper housing and transportation prior to the event. According to the Humane Society of the United States, it is not uncommon for snakes to be kept for long periods of time in trashcans, boxes, and other inappropriate enclosures without access to food and water.⁵

Some rattlesnakes are actually slaughtered during the roundup so their meat can be cooked and sold to the public. The butchering facility is a converted maintenance garage. According to observations made by Painter, some dead snakes are neglected for unknown periods of time before being processed; it is also quite possible that rattlesnake meat contaminated with gasoline (used sometimes to flush snakes from their dens) is sold to the public at these events.⁶ In addition, snakes harbor various forms of salmonella and parasites, some of which can be passed on to humans if meat is prepared improperly.

The organizers and supporters of the roundup say the event should not be cancelled because, they claim, it is economically beneficial to snake hunters and



This is the second rattlesnake pit, located behind the main building. Duct tape covered gaps in the corners to prevent snakes from escaping. Some snakes were constantly crawling up the sides.

brings tourism money to Alamogordo. However, only between 3 and 12 hunters sell snakes at the roundup, most of whom barely break even after travel costs.⁷ In addition, if the roundup is cancelled, the gun and craft shows could still exist to bring tourists to Alamogordo.

Rattlesnake Hunter Survey Fitzgerald & Painter (1994)

55% of hunters interviewed admitted they hunt on public lands. It is **ILLEGAL** to take resources from federal land for profit without permission.

73% of hunters collect snakes a season prior to or after the roundup takes place. This suggests to APNM that hunters are stockpiling snakes for the roundup, or collecting snakes for other commercial purposes.

3) APNM's estimate. Actual numbers vary slightly with year and information source. 4) See supra note 1. 5) The Humane Society of the United States. 1999. Rattlesnake roundups: A modern case of unregulated exploitation of wildlife. Published by HSUS. 59 pp. 6) See supra note 1. 7) Personal communication, Charlie Painter

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

DISTRIBUTE THIS BROCHURE throughout your community.

DONATE TO OUR PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGN – see below.

CALL OR WRITE to the Otero County Commissioners and urge them to create an ordinance that would effectively ban the rattlesnake roundup in Otero County. The Commissioners' contact information may be found at <http://www.co.otero.nm.us/> or by calling the County Administrator's office at 505-437-7427.

CALL OR WRITE to The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, P.O. Box 25112, Santa Fe, NM 87504 (505-476-8000) Attn: Director Bruce Thompson. Call or write to the New Mexico State Game Commission (the Commissioners' contact information can be found at www.gmfsh.state.nm.us , or by calling 476-8000). Tell them you oppose the rattlesnake roundup and would like to see western diamondback rattlesnakes regulated like any other protected game animal, with limits set on the number that can be taken by hunters.

CALL OR WRITE to The Alamogordo Chamber of Commerce, 1301 N. White Sands Blvd., Alamogordo, NM 88310, (Phone: 505-437-6120; Fax: 505-437-6334). Attn: Executive Director. Ask that the Chamber support humane and educational alternative events in their community regarding rattlesnakes.

CALL OR WRITE to The Otero County Fair Association, Attn: Fair Board, 401 Fair Grounds Road, Alamogordo, NM 88310, (Phone: 505-434-0788; Fax: 505-437-6134). Request that they stop renting the fairgrounds for the purpose of the rattlesnake roundup.

THANK YOU!



For more information on rattlesnake roundups, news, updates and web links visit:

apnm.org/roundup



ABOUT APNM

APNM's mission is to advocate the rights of animals by affecting systemic change, resulting in the humane treatment of all animals.



Animal Protection of New Mexico, Inc. (APNM) has been working to promote the humane treatment of animals since 1979. APNM is a non profit, 501 (c)(3) organization supported by donations, volunteers and grants. APNM accomplishes its work through education and outreach, and campaigns for change.

APNM encourages people to work for animals on a daily basis, since improving conditions for animals often means that each person must become personally involved. Please become a member and be active for animals.

Membership Coupon

Please support Animal Protection of New Mexico's efforts to end the Alamogordo Rattlesnake Roundup.

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APNM's Board of Directors may occasionally consider sharing its mailing list with carefully selected, like-minded organizations, including Political Action Committees (PAC's), when it is deemed to further APNM's mission. If you would prefer that your name and address not be shared with other organizations, please fill out the following form and return it to APNM's Albuquerque office.

I do not want my name and address shared with any other organizations.

Please send me information on APNM's electronic funds transfer program for an easy way to give a monthly donation that the animals can count on.

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