



# PARKS CANADA GIVES SNAKES A BREAK

Working to improve attitudes toward the eastern Massasauga rattlesnake



Once found in many parts of Ontario, the eastern Massasauga rattlesnake (*Sistrurus catenatus*) is now confined to four parts of the province: the Ojibway Prairie Complex, Wainfleet Bog, the Bruce Peninsula and eastern Georgian Bay (the largest, widest ranging population). The snake's range in the United States has also diminished to several isolated pockets from New York to Iowa and Missouri.



Georgian Bay Islands National Park of Canada

Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake © Parks Canada

Georgian Bay Islands National Park of Canada helps protect the Massasauga. Here, the snake can find abundant prey and a wide variety of wet and dry habitats in the rugged terrain, including peat bogs, ponds, hardwood forests, rocky islands and hibernation sites.

Georgian Bay Islands National Park (GBI) is an important refuge for the Massasauga. However, the park's total area is only 13 square kilometres. This small space does not provide enough habitat to sustain this species at risk.

Outside of the park, wetland drainage, expanding road systems, and cottage and urban development continue to reduce the habitat of the massasauga. Adding to these factors is the fact that this is Ontario's only venomous snake. Because of fear and prejudice, the public perception is that this snake is dangerous. Consequently it has been persecuted widely.

## Learning to co-exist: polishing a rattlesnake's image

Since the late 1970's, staff at GBI has striven to provide visitors with consistent messages aimed at dispelling rattlesnake myths and setting the record straight. Specifically:

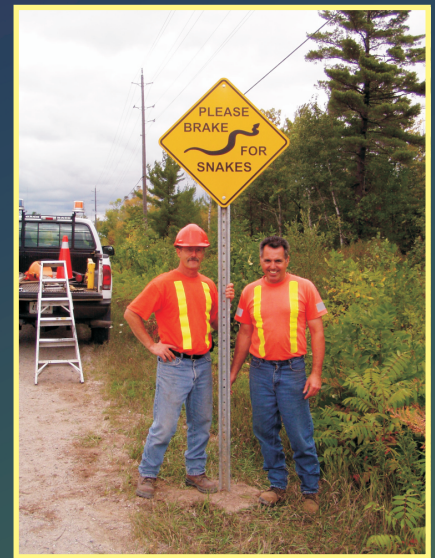
- Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnakes are shy, timid animals
- Massasaugas are not dangerous if properly respected
- The dangers associated with Massasauga can be readily addressed through appropriate clothing and behaviour
- Massasaugas are protected under the *Species at Risk Act*; killing them is a legal offence.



Releasing Eastern Massasauga rattlesnakes © Parks Canada

Through a wide array of personal and non-personal communications, staff began to see a change in visitor perception. Recognizing that not every visitor would warm to the species, staff focus on encouraging visitors to appreciate it and accept its existence. Now, seeing a Massasauga in the wild significantly enhances the visitor's experience. Nowhere is this more evident than at the YMCA camps (Kitchikewana and Queen Elizabeth II). Coincidentally located within prime Massasauga habitat, these camps provide urban youth with an opportunity to appreciate and enjoy the natural and cultural history of the park through a variety of recreational opportunities. Park staff work closely with the YMCA to enhance visitors' enjoyment through educational programming. This includes Massasauga messages to ensure learning experience and safe visit for the youth.

The results are encouraging. Despite the thousands of new park visitors each year, there has never been a negative incident involving a visitor and a Massasauga. In fact, through our Massasauga observation records, we have encountered the same individual snake for over 20 years. Observing a rattlesnake in the wild is often one of the key memories these children come away with while staying in GBI.



Working with local Georgian Bay authorities to mitigate road kill © Parks Canada

## Working with the community

Obviously, park staff alone cannot save this species. In the early 1990's representatives from GBI and Bruce Peninsula National Park joined with the Government of Ontario, the Toronto Zoo, universities, and others to establish a Recovery Team to learn from one another across the species' entire range. The Recovery Team developed tools for key audiences to provide the best science available and ensure the right decisions for protecting this species-at-risk. This included a landowner stewardship guide, habitat guidelines for municipal planners, a DVD for working in Massasauga habitat, and a website ([www.massasauga.ca](http://www.massasauga.ca)). Work has also been done with numerous First Nations to enhance the natural and cultural importance of this species.

## Yes, but is it working?

Although direct cause and effect is difficult to gauge, we believe that there is a change in attitude. In 2004, a report was commissioned to evaluate the public education and outreach efforts with respect to the Massasauga. Through a random survey, most respondents indicated that, although unaware of the direct cause, their attitude and behaviour towards Massasauga have changed in some way over the past 10 years. 95% knew that the Massasauga's should be respected and not killed, and 87% knew that Massasaugas are important to the ecosystem. Clearly, positive gains have been made in public knowledge of this species.



Community presentation on Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake © Parks Canada

Education and engagement work will continue to ensure park visitors have a safe and memorable experience while at GBI and that the Massasauga remains protected. The Recovery Team will continue to develop tools to provide the best information to land-use managers for the long-term protection of the species on its road to recovery.

For more information:

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Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake headshot with tongue © Parks Canada