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Snake Education Fosters Empathy, Averts Atrocities



The diminutive Butler's Garter Snake, is cradled easily in open hands. Never grasp a snake by the neck or let its body dangle unsupported when handling.

The timing of the incident was inconvenient for us, and thus, most likely for the snake, too.

We were smack in the middle of packing up to head home at the end of an extended-family summer afternoon spent at Portage Lake beach in Waterloo Recreation Area. Between the crowded spread of food, drink and tableware, plus a slew of pertinent beach accessories for Carol and me, our four kids, two of my sons' significant others, and our toddler grandson, several trips with armloads of stuff were underway between our picnic table and our cars in a distant parking lot. My son, Robin, was keeping his son, Sage, busy playing in the shallow water until the packing was finished.

We had also brought a couple of kayaks. Aleesha had already embarked in one of them back to the boat launch, a short paddle down the shoreline away from the beach and swimming area. Once there we would need to lift and strap them onto the roof of the van.

I had just begun to paddle away from shore in the second kayak when the commotion began; a child's scream from the swimming area behind me followed by a boy's voice yelling, *Watch out, watch out!* On a late August weekend afternoon the beach was fairly crowded, so many more heads of kids and adults swiveled in the direction of the raised voices.

The source of the excitement was immediately evident. A boy lifted a medium-sized snake, panicked and thrashing, out of the water by the tail. When it pulled its head up near his hand the boy dropped it into the water then immediately seized and lifted it again. This time it may have bitten him or nearly did as he let out a yelp. He dropped then grabbed it one more time, now in a full-fisted grip right behind the head. The rest of the snake – perhaps two feet in length – writhed in the empty air beneath his fist. He raised it high in a triumphant display and his friends cheered.

"Hey, look what I caught," he yelled toward a cluster of adults gathered at a picnic table under a tree on the lawn. He waded rapidly toward shore with the other kids trailing closely. That's when I felt the urge

to shout to my son who was in the shallows with little Sage not very far from them.

“Robin! They’re going to maim or kill that snake!”

As the kids left the water I saw Robin call to them. Their heads turn in his direction. I paddled off to the boat launch fairly confident that the snake would not be harmed further.

A short while later, I drove the van with the kayaks around to the lot where the others in our caravan were waiting. As everyone boarded the vehicles Robin surprised me with the news that the kids had passed close enough to him that he was able to see and identify the distressed snake as an Eastern Garter. Since



Our gentle male Northern Water Snake is calm and easy to hold for handlers of any age.

it was swimming near the kids in waist-deep water we had assumed that it would most likely be a Northern Water Snake - a common piscivore that routinely swims and dives. Unlike the water snake an Eastern Garter is not an accomplished diver and rarely swims away from the vegetated shoreline; unless, that is, it is startled or chased by a perceived threat on shore.

I imagined this hapless individual, maybe as little as ten minutes prior to its discovery and capture, hidden in the security of the overgrowth that sprouted a short distance down the shoreline from the beach... Some kids, perhaps looking for frogs which also occupied the vegetated area, scare it out of hiding. It slithers into the water to evade them. Its momentum carries it into deeper water, and it

commences to swim parallel to the water’s edge with an intent to make its way to another overgrown safe spot further down the shoreline. Since it is not adapted to swimming like a water snake, however, it begins to tire. Unfortunately, its progress takes it straight into the designated swimming area. Suddenly, it finds itself surrounded by large roiling, splashing hominids.

Robin said that he had called to the kids that it was just a harmless garter snake and that they should release it. He added that the snake was very uncomfortable being pinched by the neck and left dangling that way and that it should be held with hands underneath to support it. The boy holding it replied that if he did that it would bite, but a girl walked up and carefully lifted her cupped hands underneath it while the boy kept hold of its neck. Robin told them to just take it over to the long grass along the side of the picnic area and let it go. They continued to their table where others gathered around it. Robin collected Sage and a few beach toys and headed up to the parking lot to meet the rest of the group.

When we arrived home and unloaded the car, Carol lamented that a new beach toy that she had just bought and given to Sage was not among the stowed items. It had been inadvertently left at the beach.

Two days later, she and I made a day-trip to hike and explore some natural areas in Washtenaw County. At one point on the drive home we realized we were only a couple of miles from Portage Lake. Carol suggested that we make a quick stop to see if there was a slight chance the toy might still be there. She remembered seeing a large ‘lost and found’ box on the beach.

We parked then trekked across the expansive lawn to the beach. Carol bee-lined directly to the box. I veered toward the lawn’s edge adjacent to the wild overgrowth that bordered it. Every few steps a startled Leopard Frog leaped into the dense vegetation.

Suddenly my eyes locked onto a coiled snake at the grassy edge. It didn’t move as I neared, and I immediately saw why. It was an average-sized female Eastern Garter Snake. Her still body - even the

stripes - had turned a bluish hue. She was wound into such a perfectly tight circle of concentric coils she looked as if she had been arranged that way on purpose. Her head rested precisely in the center. Two opposing, sharply rectangular dents had severely deformed the shape of her head and nearly met near the middle. Blood had dried around their periphery. The mini-vise-like wound immediately made me think that the killing instrument had been something akin to a pair of pliers.

We'll never know for certain if this was the same snake that the kids had caught, but the circumstantial evidence makes a strong case. If so, I can't help but wonder exactly who among them decided to commit the atrocity? When I called Robin and told him what I had found he said that his short exchange with the kids did not give him an impression that they were intent on killing it. Did a snake-hating adult enforce the perspective that the only good snake is a dead snake? Kids don't normally carry pliers.

I choose to hope that not all witnesses present were on board with what transpired. The perfectly arranged state of repose indicated to me that someone had arranged the snake's lifeless body with thoughtful care.

At presentations and exhibits over decades now, while our state-native snakes are on interactive display, we have had the opportunity to hear countless cumulative hours of "snake stories" related by attendees. In a significant portion of them the encounter, almost always in the presence of other people, did not end well for the snake.



Every such incident, whether personal or as it is related to us, fuels our mission to fill an education void - the omission of lessons about snakes, especially local ones, from a qualified instructor at virtually all grade levels in our schools. Currently, kids are left to learn about wild snake species in a haphazard manner often from random, highly-unqualified adults or sketchy internet videos that cast snakes in a negative light. Is it any wonder that a portion of them grow into snake-averse, or worse, snake-killing adults?

Enter Nature Discovery's presentation entitled, *Michigan Snakes Alive*. An hour is hardly enough time to learn *all*

the pertinent info about snakes in general, much less the seventeen species found across the state, but it's a heck of a start. Given as little as an hour of exposure to an array of live Michigan species, students demonstrate remarkable shifts in attitude.

In 2009, Straits Area Audubon, based in Cheboygan, began fund-raising and working with Nature Discovery to bring the presentation to mostly fifth-grade students in dozens of schools, then, over the ensuing years, to thousands of students across the northern Lower Peninsula. The program became an annual fixture in many of them.

At the start of each presentation I ask how many of the students know someone who has killed a wild snake. The show of hands is nearly unanimous. Some fingers even point at fellow students.

That's what prompted us during the 2019 school year to institute "The Pledge." All presentations conclude with a



5th graders handle garter snakes.

ten-minute period where students are invited to handle, pass around, and physically *bond* with up to a dozen snakes of many Michigan species. The expressions on their faces and positive comments evince the shift in perception. Then, after the snakes are gathered, I prompt all of them to raise their right hand and repeat the words to a vow. The most recent version goes like this: *I, (state your name), solemnly swear to never harm or kill a wild snake. I also promise to the best of my ability to never allow anyone in my company to harm or kill one.*

It's such a perfect way to end a *Michigan Snakes Alive* presentation that we decided to take it a step further. We designed a sticker to distribute to students. It advertises to others that they took the pledge and opens a door for the "snake-educated" student to share accurate, positive information about snakes with others.



After photographing Carol's right hand, around which was draped a hyperactive Northern Ribbon Snake we eventually got the perfect shot to incorporate into the pledge sticker layout. SAAS again raised money to fund the printing. We were all set to take it to press in early 2020 for the next round of presentations when... *Aargh!* The pandemic struck.

Earlier this year, Theresa Moran, a long-time supporter of Nature Discovery and lifetime supporter of snake conservation, read about the pledge and the stickers in one of our past newsletters and loved the idea. She presented it at a meeting of the International Herpetological Symposium. Members stepped up to donate the cost of printing over 5000 stickers! The snakes, the pledge, and most recently, the stickers, were poised to engage all future participants in *Michigan Snakes Alive* presentations, whenever they could safely resume.



We're thrilled to report that after a two-and-a-half-year hiatus the next round of presentations in northern Michigan schools - arranged through dedicated fund-raising and coordination by SAAS - is set for mid-October. Would you like to make a donation to SAAS to help fund further *Michigan Snakes Alive* presentations for kids in schools Up North? Visit <http://straitsareaaudubon.com/> to contact them.

Would you like *Michigan Snakes Alive* presentations in a school of your own choosing? Contact us to make arrangements. Pledge, Stickers, and lots of live snakes included!

- Jim McGrath

Sportsmen for Youth Day, September 10

Our full interactive exhibit of over 40 species of Michigan-native reptiles & amphibians is just one of dozens of family-friendly stations and activities celebrating the great outdoors at Sportsmen for Youth's annual "Youth Day" at Muskegon County Fairground. Gate opens at 9am, Saturday, September 10.

Admission is free. For more details visit their website events page: <https://sportsmenforyouth.com/events/>



Nature Discovery

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Visit Our Nature Center by Appointment

Suggested Minimum Donation:
\$5/person/hour



The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Individual adults, couples, individual families and small groups are welcome to schedule a safe, intimate outdoor or indoor visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and Amphibians.” The unique, hands-on experiences offered here can be found nowhere else! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level.



Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles,” all 10 species native to our state, as they swim in pools at your feet. Meet, pet and feed “Milberta”, our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.

Handle Michigan's 3 species of garter snakes while learning how to tell them apart, then watch them eat worms and live frogs. Handle a gentle 6-foot Black Rat Snake – the largest in the state!

Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders, as well as caterpillars and spiders to encounter. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify birds, insects, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

Ask about...

- ... arranging a guided interpretive experience at a local natural area of your or our choosing for your small group of students, adults or families.
- ... weekly or biweekly drop-off visits with experiential activities for your elementary thru high school student(s).

Contact us for more information or to make an appointment.

*Thank you to the many supporters of our mission, past and present,
including those this past month...*

*The Baumann Family
Matt & William Burke
Grand River Bait & Tackle
International Herpetological Symposium
Zachary McNelley
David Meyer*

*The 5th instar Luna Moth caterpillar is a
master of camouflage on a walnut branch.
See them in person at our nature center now.*



High school student, Zachary McNelley is a one-man invasives-destroying machine. He enjoys working off-trail, cutting and burning invasive growth to the benefit of Nature Discovery's natural community.

Volunteer Opportunities

Attention adults and middle school - high school students!

We need your help. Between feeding and tank/pool cleaning, our huge zoo of state-native reptiles and amphibians requires hours of daily maintenance. Our natural area is in perpetual need of invasive shrub and vine removal, as well. Whether you'd like to work with animals or outdoors with hands, tools and fire, you can set your own schedule for weekly or biweekly sessions.

Contact us to set up an appointment to learn the various tasks involved first-hand. A great after-school or weekend project for teens.



Our complete collection of Michigan turtles must be fed daily, and tanks/pools cleaned every week.

“Denial is increasingly confined to the uninformed.”

...says physicist and co-founder of the Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI), Amory Lovins, who proposed the possibility of an all-renewable energy system way back in 1976. As climate-driven natural catastrophes have been increasing in frequency and severity, policy analysts and governments are finally heeding and acting on what scientists have been discussing for decades.

https://insideclimatenews.org/news/25082022/inside-clean-energy-renewables/?utm_source=InsideClimate+News&utm_campaign=294aed9976-amp;utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_29c928ffb5-294aed9976-327904609

We like this straight-forward explanation and list of suggestions for action from the David Suzuki Foundation. It guides us to how we can get involved as individuals to combat climate change. Stop fretting and start acting.

https://davidsuzuki.org/what-you-can-do/what-is-climate-change/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwpeaYBhDXARIsAEzItbHLMbPHkwusnJV--WoKJNOAVLcogr-o2re3HVhhs_0edLgGOC3EIFgaAjbLEALw_wcB

-JM

The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, “What were you thinking? Couldn’t you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn’t you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?” -Al Gore

I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. - Greta Thunberg

Scientific findings should never be distorted or influenced by political considerations.

- from President Biden’s Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking.



Less Beef = Less CO₂
Cowspiracy.com

**Union of
Concerned Scientists**
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Worldwarzero.com



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