**DR MARISA PATERSON MLA SPEECH**

**28 March 2023**

**Snakes in the Assembly!**

Start

I give notice that I shall move the motion circulated in my name.

Thank you, Madame Speaker, I am excited to be bringing this motion forward today, as I think it is essential that snakes are not only better protected, but that there is more education in the community about how we can live alongside our reptile friends.

I hope that all of the Members have had the chance to meet the snakes in the Assembly today, as well as Gavin one of the ACT’s most prominent snake catchers! Bringing snakes into the Legislative Assembly might seem like a hiss-terical idea, but I hope that all Members got the chance to see why they are so important, and why supporting people like Gavin to do this work in the community is essential for Canberra.

Reputation

Snakes have somewhat of a slippery reputation, and I am sure many in this place will agree that such a bad reputation is not entirely fair.

Whilst of course many snakes are genuinely be dangerous to humans and our pets, we must also learn how to live alongside these creatures respectfully. Why, you might ask?

Well, snakes are, in fact, essential to the biodiversity of the ACT. So, Madam Speaker, it is time to shed our fears and scale-up our efforts to conserve and protect these vital creatures.

Biodiversity/ Conservation Council

Last week I discussed the importance of snakes to our environment with Elle Lawless, the Executive Director of the Conservation Council ACT who told me that, "The ACT is home to incredible wildlife including our stunning snakes[...]. Biodiversity is essential for the processes that support all life on Earth, including humans. Without a wide range of animals and plants together with snakes we cannot have the healthy ecosystems that we rely on to provide us with the air we breathe, water we drink and the food we eat. And nature itself is intrinsically valuable in its own right and has a right to thrive."

In the ACT, we have an abundance of native wildlife, something which we are all so proud of. Whilst they don’t have quite the appeal of some of our fluffier native animals, our slithery friends deserve just as much attention! Currently in the ACT there are eight different species of native snakes, five of which are regarded venomous to humans.

Whilst I understand that venomous snakes aren’t the most appealing of animals, they are critical to our region’s ecosystem. The ACT’s Environment Directorate praises snakes as “important in the web of life and food chain”.

In Canberra snakes, along with other reptiles, snakes make up a significant proportion of the middle-order predators that keep natural ecosystems working. Without them, the numbers of prey species would increase to unnatural levels and the predators that eat snakes would struggle to find food. Your kitchen pantry may well be rodent free as a result of Canberra’s native snakes having an impact on reducing rodent population numbers!

Protection & education

Even though they are helping us out in the kitchen, people often hold a lot of fear for snakes.

Whilst snakes are protected under the Nature Conservation Act 2014, and it is an offence to kill, injure or take snakes from the wild, people often have a fear-based reaction to seeing a snake.

Snakes are highly stigmatised in the community, which means many people are fearful of them and they are prone to being injured or attacked by people when contact occurs.

Members may have noticed that the snake who joined us today is severely injured, most likely due to an interaction with a human who had an adverse reaction to her being around.

Injuring snakes can disrupt the natural balance of ecosystems, lead to declines in important species, and even result in unintended consequences for human health and well-being.

As mentioned previously, some species of snakes play important roles in controlling rodent populations, these rodents can carry diseases and cause damage to crops and property. In areas where snakes are killed or removed, rodent populations may increase, which leads to an increased risk of disease transmission and economic losses.

By injuring or killing these animals, we further contribute to their decline and may be negatively impacting ecosystems and biodiversity.

As our population grows, so do does our urban environment. The addition of new suburbs and buildings means that we are likely to see an increase in snakes in our daily lives. The change in climate is also increasing the length of time that snakes are ‘active’. Gavin Smith who as well as being a snake catcher and educator is also a researcher at ANU, told me that snakes have been sighted in the ACT in May, June, July and August. Whilst this is not the time period that snakes are known to be the most active, they are still very much around.

All of these factors make it even more important for us to develop a greater understanding of snakes, and how to best live alongside them. Living with snakes sounds like a bit of a slippery situation, but with some education and caution, we can all co-hiss-t in harmony.

One of the vital parts of work that Gavin and to all of ACT’s snake catchers do is education in the community. This work is important in keeping both our Canberra community and natural environment safe.

As new Canberrans arrive, especially from migrant and refugee backgrounds, snakes can be a huge fear for people. It is especially important that time is spent with our newest residents to ensure that people know how to live alongside our native wildlife safely, with the lowest possible risk of harm, and that both our wildlife itself is protected.

Running education programs in the ACT, is not something that is particularly smooth sailing though. Under current legislation, the licenced snake educators cannot keep venomous snakes. This includes for the purposes of educating the community about the behaviour and ecology of localsnakes.

I was shocked to learn, Madame Speaker, that such regulations have led to cases where snakes have been flown in from interstate for snake handling training courses, creating a momentous effort and expense to educate future Canberrans who are committed to catching and educating people in Canberra of safe practices around these venomous creatures. Transporting snakes from interstate may also be distressing for those snakes and not to mention biosecurity issues.

We need to ensure that Canberrans are highly educated when it comes to snakes.

Supporting snake catchers

In the ACT there are four licensed snake catchers: ACT Snake Removals, Canberra Snake Catcher and Reptile Removals, Canberra Reptile Zoo, and Canberra Snake Rescue and Relocation. these licensed operators respond to calls from the community to safely remove snakes from people’s homes and businesses and release them back into the wild if they are not injured.

Most of these snake catchers and educators do this work around full-time jobs and family responsibilities. This role that they play in our community is commendable, and is driven by their love and respect of our native snakes. The ACT Government must explore ways in which we can support this work so that we don’t burn out these individuals, who many in the community consider that they are performing an essential service, removing snakes from Canberra’s houses and sheds.

Legislation around caring for snakes

In the ACT, snakes are most active from September to April when they sun themselves or when they move in search of food or water. Sometimes in their pursuit of food or water, they can enter suburban gardens and houses.

This year alone Gavin Smith has rescued, caught, and released over 175 snakes from people’s homes, workplaces, schools, and community centres. This includes removing four snakes from different schools in a period of 24-hours!!

When snake catchers like Gavin reach the snakes, they frequently find that snakes have been injured.

Under current regulations if a snake is injured, licensed snake catchers are only allowed to keep them for veterinary care and treatment for 48-hours. When a snake requires further care, this means that the snakes have to then be moved to a veterinary clinic or euthanised. This puts extra unnecessary pressure on veterinary clinics, when a licensed and trained snake catcher could continue care through to release.

Whilst I understand that the period of 48 hours is the same as anyone is allowed to keep any other injured native wildlife before seeking veterinary assistance, veterinary clinics are often not set up for housing snakes or don’t have trained staff to administer treatment. It should also be noted that some vet clinics will not allow venomous snakes on their premises due to insurance and safety reasons, so options for expert care are limited.

In addition, the only other place you may find snakes is Canberra Reptile Zoo however they only have a licence to keep captive bred venomous snakes, so are not able to care for/keep injured animals from the wild.

Calls on

The motion calls on the ACT to consider ways to better support those who are most committed to protecting and caring for our Canberra snakes. To allow trained and licenced professionals to keep native snakes for the purposes of education. The motion also ask for the ACT Government to explore the possibility of extending the 48-hr window that licensed snake catchers can care for an injured snake that has been caught to allow them to be cared for, for as long as they need veterinary supervision. Further, the motion also calls on the ACT Government to support snake education programs run in the ACT, including education programs for new migrants and refugees that experience heightened fear from snakes.

Conclusion

Yesterday Gavin said to me, “It is important for snakes to be respected and cared for, like they have been for thousands of years by the Ngunnawal peoples. As Canberra grows in population, it is essential that the community understand how to live alongside our native snakes in a respectful and safe way. In my work both as a researcher and a snake catcher, it is increasingly apparent how essential it is for more to be done both in regard to education of the community and care of snakes when they are injured”.

I hope this motion is just the start of greater protections for our native snakes, and support for those catching and caring for snakes and educating the community.

I believe the work that the ACT’s snake catchers do is a vital community service that should be supported by the ACT Government.

As we grow in population numbers, I hope that we can do so in harmony with our environment.

It's time to shift from a position of fear, to a position of respect and protect these essential members of our ecosystem.

Ends

**Closing speech**

Thank you madam speaker, and thank you to my Assembly colleagues for their support. I only met Gavin a couple of months ago, but his passion for these scaley creatures is second to none! Thanks to Gavin and all of the ACT snake catchers for educating me, and for all the work you do in the community.

I am excited this motion has passed, and I look forward to seeing a future where we can live alongside snakes, where they are cared for and Canberrans are well educated in how to live in harmony with our slithery friends.

Snakes are not slimy, scary creatures. They are essential parts of our ecosystem, and we need to protect the!