

REPATRIATION OF MASSASAUGAS (*Sistrurus catenatus*) TO THE OJIBWAY PRAIRIE IN WINDSOR, ONTARIO

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Abstract: After three years of preparation 27 captive-born three year-old massasaugas (*Sistrurus catenatus*), borne to females that were locally rescued, were repatriated to the Ojibway Prairie Provincial Nature Reserve in June 2006. The snakes' behaviors and movements were monitored using radio telemetry through to spring 2007. No snakes survived after one year. After a soft release most snakes remained in the immediate vicinity of the release site. Typical snake behaviors were observed including courtship, mating and hibernation selection. Mortality of juvenile snakes is known to be very high. Twenty-one snakes (77%) survived the summer. Fifteen (55%) successfully hibernated. Unfortunately exceptionally heavy winter rains drowned 9 snakes and likely caused the remaining six to emerge early into cold weather where they were quickly predated. Documented predators included coyote and mink. The massasauga is a flagship species of Ojibway's tallgrass prairie. This innovative conservation project allowed the recovery team, municipal, provincial and federal governments, local residents, stewardship and environmental interest groups to work together towards conserving a species at risk within an urban environment. Education and public awareness were a strong component of this project and incredible community support was evidenced with all of the snakes being adopted through an Adopt-A-Snake program. A one-time repatriation of Massasaugas is not guaranteed to result in immediate success. Mortality from predation, persecution, disease and environmental events can easily offset the limited reproduction potential of a small number of snakes. Introducing animals into a new site is difficult, belying a common misconception that it is okay to relocate them. Habitat protection is clearly the preferred choice for long-term success. It will be a challenge to maintain a population of rattlesnakes at Ojibway.