

Turcot work means snakes will have to move

Relocation would cost \$50-100,000, biologists say

BY MARIAN SCOTT, THE GAZETTE DECEMBER 6, 2010 7:27 AM



Dekay's brown snakes living in the Turcot yard must be relocated before construction on the new interchange can begin.

Photograph by: Patrick Galois; www.amphibia-nature.org, Gazette

MONTREAL - The 106 residents facing eviction to make way for the new Turcot Interchange aren't the only ones losing their homes to the \$3-billion project.

Quebec's Transport Department must also find new homes for a shy species of snakes that lives in the former Turcot yards.

"Turcot is an ideal place for these snakes. There are a lot of rocks where they can hide and it has a good southern exposure," said Patrick Galois, a biologist and consultant with Amphibia-Nature, a research group specializing in amphibians and reptiles.

Galois's team of researchers found 43 Dekay's brown snakes on the site during a 2007 inventory for the city.

Under environmental laws, the snakes must be moved to a safer location before the seven-year construction project planned for 2011-2018 can begin.

"We are just at the beginning of the process. If this is a condition, then this will have to be done before we start," said Guillaume Lavoie, a public affairs consultant for Transport Quebec.

Lavoie did not know how much it will cost to move the snakes. However, wildlife specialists were skeptical of an article in Saturday's La Presse claiming the job will cost millions.

The price will more likely be in the neighbourhood of \$50,000 or possibly \$100,000 at the outside, said Patrick Asch, director of Heritage Laurentien, an environmental group that has restored waterfront areas in southwestern Montreal.

The Montreal archipelago is the only part of Quebec where brown snakes are found, Galois said. The population on the Island of Montreal probably numbers in the hundreds, which are increasingly confined to isolated patches, he said.

The timid species, with brown spots and a tan stripe, grow to 23 to 33 centimetres (about a foot). They slither under rocks that absorb warmth from the sun and hibernate by burrowing under the frost line. They feed on snails, earthworms and slugs and are often found on vacant industrial land where they shelter under debris. Their main predators are raccoons, red foxes, cats and birds of prey.

Provincial conservation laws require that the snakes be protected as a species that could potentially become endangered or vulnerable.

As vacant land is developed, the number of sites where the snakes can survive is being drastically reduced, Galois said. "We are facing a major loss of habitat."

Without protective measures, the species could disappear from the island by the end of the century, he predicted.

Galois said the best option is to capture the snakes and move them nearby to the St. Jacques escarpment, which will be preserved as parkland.

Brown snakes, found throughout much of eastern North America, are one of three surviving species of snakes on the Island of Montreal, Galois said.

Forest-dwelling ring-necked snakes are found on Mount Royal, while garter snakes are common across the province.

"It's important to preserve biodiversity," Galois said. "Unfortunately, these snakes often live in sectors that are prized by humans for development."

mascot@montrealgazette.com



"Turcot is an ideal place for these snakes," says biologist Patrick Galois. "There are a lot of rocks where they can hide and it has a good southern exposure." He says development is causing "a major loss of habitat."

Photograph by: ALLEN MCINNIS , THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

