Torrey House Press
WILD WORDS. WILD PLACES.

Pyro: The Quest for a Beautifully Elusive Snake
by Dallin Kohler

Discussion Questions

1. Many people are afraid of snakes especially since snakes often symbolize danger in stories and myths. In *Pyro*, Kohler demonstrates his love and enthusiasm for these reptiles. How do you feel about snakes? Did *Pyro* affect your thinking or feelings about them?

2. Kohler explains the naming conventions for reptile species, as well as explaining the meanings of quite a few of the names, which typically include the name of the person who described or "discovered" it and a characteristic feature. If you discovered a new species, how would you want to name it?

3. Cattle grazing on public lands is very widespread in the western United States. Kohler is clearly not a fan of the practice, citing habitat and climate damage caused by grazing cattle. Livestock operators argue that public land grazing is necessary to maintain their livelihood and way of life, particularly in the West where so much of the land is managed by various governments. Where do you stand on this issue? How would you balance the competing needs?

4. Many people are aware that animals such as skunks, ferrets, and polecats have musk glands used for defense. Were you aware that snakes also have defensive musk glands? Have you ever had a snake musk on you? Does this snake characteristic make you less likely to capture or handle snakes?

5. Kohler explains ways that roads contribute to finding and studying snakes, from building museum collections with the bodies of road-killed snakes to road cruising in order to find snakes. Does this seem an easy way into herpetology study? Do you plan to drive slowly down lonely roads at night to look for snakes?

6. Kohler notes many ways that humans use their own bodies to test animal characteristics. Henry Walter Bates knew that some butterflies taste bad, while other similar looking butterflies taste fine (p. 108). Someone figured out that we can get high by licking toads (p. 100). Karl Schmidt tested the virulency of boomslang venom on himself (p. 15-16). How far would you be willing to go to gain scientific knowledge? Is it more ethical to conduct tests on ourselves than on animals?

7. Kohler points out that the blood of Western fence lizards kills the bacteria that cause Lyme disease (p. 165). Is this a possible medical benefit to humans? Do you know of examples of medications developed from plants or animals? Is the possibility that they might have characteristics beneficial to humans a good reason to protect the viability of plant and animal species? Should this be more widely advertised to gather support for conservation efforts? Why or why not?

8. Kohler spends quite a bit of time talking about the need to publish research in academic science. Chapter Twelve shares details of the process of publication. Do you share his concern that people are rejecting scientific research and information because they don't understand the process that leads to reliability? Do you think explanations such as this will help?

9. Kohler notes that snakes are among the many species of plants and animals endangered by what is called the "sixth mass extinction" (p. 203). Is this a concern for you? Do you support Kohler's proposed actions to support species continuation such as being an advocate (p. 204) or collecting pictures and memories rather than specimens (p. 205). Do you have other suggestions of ways to support species continuation?

10. Kohler frequently says that the snakes, lizards, and other wildlife are adorable. What is your favorite adjective for the wildlife you see?

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Activity Ideas

1. Kohler writes frequently about the ease and usefulness of iNaturalist. Sign up and begin uploading photographs of your sightings. https://www.inaturalist.org/

2. Citizen Science has a snake count program to map and track snake distributions around the world. They will help you learn to find and identify snakes if you sign up to help. https://www.snakeconservation.org/citizen-science

3. Some state and national parks employ naturalists who are eager to share information and spotting tips with visitors to the park. If you're new to looking for and identifying a type of creature, contact a naturalist in your area or at a park you are planning to visit.

4. Visit a zoo or natural history museum to learn about their captive and preserved specimens.