Astrolotl Round 2: Hillel The Elder

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Even though I was more than satisfied with the last round of Astro nerfs – due to being deserved without being too extreme - it appears we are back the discussion of nerfing Astro once again.

I will start off by answering the questions laid in the OP:

1) Do you think Astrolotl's presence in the metagame reaches a bar such that a nerf is needed?

A nerf (or ban) is needed when a Pokémon's presence is overcentralizing the metagame. To clarify, my term for overcentralizing is when either the Pokémon has an extremely high usage rate, or if it restricts team building by forcing players to run multiple specific Pokémon just to check the overcentralizing Pokémon. Over-centralization is unhealthy for any format because it limits team building options, and leads to a low variance within the metagame. An example of a mon that is overcentralizing by usage stats is Gen 7 Ubers Primal Groudon. According to the Smogon Usage Stats rate, in October, 2019, the usage rate that a player with ladder ranking => 1760 used P.Don was 71.614%. Another example of an overcentralizing mon is Spectier in OU. According to the January 2021 usage stats, Spect was the 17th most popular Pokémon for players with ELO => 1825 with a usage rate of 12.189%. Despite this low usage rate among top players, it is currently being suspect tested in OU. This is due to Spectier restricting team building by forcing people to run at least 1 of its checks/counters are else they lose to it. Some Pokémon that are not considered OU are used just to counter Spect (Ex: Obstagoon, Zarude, or even Exploud). As stated in the OP, the CAP metagame council decided to open discussion of potentially nerfing Astrolotl "given its performance in the recent CAP Snake Draft" (quziel).
Based on this, I decided to examine the usage stats presented in the thread "CAP Snake Draft 1: Replays and Usage Stats" so see if Astrolotl is an overcentralizing Pokémon based on its usage stats. According to SHSP's post in the aforementioned thread, below are the weekly and cumulative usage stats of Astro. Note that these weekly usage stats are independent of each other. So, week 1 stats don't influence week 6 stats.

1. Week 1: Used 0 times (Note: Phero and Urshi were still legal)
2. Week 2: 6th most popular. Used 7 times with a 23.33% usage rate
3. Week 3: 3rd most popular. Used 10 times with a 29.41% usage rate
4. Week 4: Tied with multiple mons for 7th most popular. Used 8 times with a 22.22% usage rate (note: Phero was banned).
5. Week 5: 2nd most popular mon. Used 14 times with a 41.18% usage rate.
6. Cumulative (usage stats for entire tournament): 3rd most used. Used 41 times with a 25.31% usage rate.

Astro caught on really fast after Week 1. The fact that it started off having no usage and ended up 3rd most used overall is worth noting. But the overall usage shows that while Astro is highly popular and is a top tier in the format, it is not overcentralizing the format. 25.31% is not a super high usage rate by the standards of CAP tournaments. According to LucarioOfLegends, the weekly usage stats of the most used tournament in CAPPL ranged from 46.88% - 64%. Astro's highly weekly usage stat was 41.18%. Based on the usage rates of Snake Draft and CAPPL, it appears that the CAP format has been quite decentralized and balanced since CAPPL. Overall, Astro does qualify as an overcentralizing Pokémon based on usage statistics.

The next component of what I define to be an overcentralizing Pokémon is how the Pokémon can inherently restrict team building. Effectively, does Astrololt cause a certain team a team style to be super dominant, do people need to run multiple checks or counters just to beat it, etc. After discussing with SunMYSER, Astrolotl seems to shine best on Balance, Bulky Offense, and some HO teams which is why these teams have proliferated. But not to the point of overcentralizing the metagame. Nor have I seen teams go out of their way to counter Astrolotl. Every team tends to carry at least 1 check or counter, but not to the extent that overcentralizing mons like Spectier does to teambuilding. Therefore, Astrololt does not qualify as an overcentralizing Pokemon.

Based on my breakdown of the 2 aspects that define a Pokémon as overcentralizing, Astrolotl does not qualify either condition. Its usage rate is not that high and it does not appear to overly restrict team building. Therefore, I do not think Astrolotl's presence in the metagame is not overbearing enough that it warrants any nerfs.

2) What aspects of Astrolotl do you consider to be out of line, or potentially nerf-worthy?

There are 2 aspects of Astrolotl that the community considers to be out of line. According to the OP, Astrolotl's longevity due to regenerator allows it to dance around and outlive its checks, and its large utility move pool makes it difficult to set up against.

But another aspect of Astrolotl that might be considered to be "out of line" is the incredible amount of role compression it has with a set of Fire Lash/Knock Off/Spikes/Encore. This set gives you Item control, defense control, hazard control, 2 excellent stall breaking tools in Fire Lash and Encore, and easy ways to generate momentum through Encore and Spikes. Astro is an amazing team player and easy to fit onto many different types of teams. But Astro is not a jack of all trades who can do a lot of things, but isn't the best at any 1 role it does. Instead, all of the roles it does, it is considered one of the best at.

Nerf Proposals:

While I personally don't think Astro should be nerfed, I am well aware that I am in the minority. Even if Astro does not get nerfed now, this will get discussed in the future, and nerfs will inevitably happen. As the OP says "If Not Now, When?" So in case the community wants to nerf Astrolotl, I have 2 unique proposals:

1. Remove Key Support Moves (specifically Spikes and Encore): Astro's swiss army knife of a move pool allows it to be very splash able and generate momentum very easily. But I don't want Astro to lose Fire Lash or Knock Off. Astro's concept was offensive team support so removing attacking moves that simultaneously support its teammates goes against its concept. Based on the replays posted in the OP, I see Encore and Spikes as the main culprits. Astro's ability to lay multiple layers of spikes throughout a game lets it pressure and outlast its checks, while Encore can generate big momentum and makes it difficult to use Astro as set-up bait. So, removing Encore and Spikes seems like a simple nerf that should dramatically hurt Astro without straying away from its concept. It's not able to compress as many roles as it currently can while still being a great team player due to still having plenty of options to fill in the gaps in its move pool.

2. Replace Regenerator with Rough Skin and add Recover to Astro's movepool: Astro's longevity solely comes from its ability, Regenerator. If it were to lose Regenerator, Astro would be unable to pivot in and out throughout the game and outlast its checks. However, just getting rid of Regenerator and replacing it with a potentially unviable ability would be excessive and cripple Astro which is not desirable. Astro should still have some degree of longevity in order to support its team throughout a game. Going back to its concept of "Offensive Team Support", Astro feels like a full support mon rather than a support mon that also has an offensive presence. Therefore, to both support its teammates and help Astrolotl increase its offensive pressure throughout the game, I propose it should gain the ability Rough Skin, and add Recover to its move pool. Recover still means Astro has longevity, but unlike Regenerator, Astro needs to spend turns to manually recover, and has a finite amount of turns it can be used. Furthermore, with Recover taking up a move slot, Astro cannot compress as many roles. This is def more radical but hopefully should be a meaningful nerf without completely neutering Astrolotl.

Works Cited

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