

*Research Summary - November 2021*

**Methodology:**

On behalf of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Yorkville Strategies conducted focus groups to gauge public opinion and perceptions of animal trapping across the United States.

The focus groups were conducted between November 8-10, 2021.

The focus groups sampled the opinions of a broad cross-section of the population segmenting by regions; Northeast, Southeast, Midwest and West.

Due to the pandemic, in-person focus groups could not be held. Focus group participants were recruited from across the country and focus groups were conducted using a virtual platform. This methodology enabled a diverse group of participants from various geographic regions of the US participate.

Each focus groups ran for ~1:15 hours and questioned participants at a high level about their current issue set, their awareness and understanding of wildlife trapping and their rationale for support or opposition to the practice.



ASSOCIATION *of*  
FISH & WILDLIFE  
AGENCIES

---



**THESE PROJECTS HAVE BEEN SUPPORTED** by Wildlife Restoration funds, through grants administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program: *Partnering to fund conservation and connect people with nature.*

## Strategic Summary:

### 1. 'Current Issue Landscape:

- a. Americans are concerned about coping with Covid and its aftermath. There is ongoing concern about the virus itself and some of the public health policies arising from the pandemic (vaccines etc.).
- b. A consequence of the pandemic has been major economic disruptions, particularly when it comes to the cost of living, and the mismatch between labour demands (unfilled jobs) and the workforce (unemployment).
- c. Participants also expressed concerns related to crime, civility in politics and society, world affairs (China) and the environment.
- d. There was an environmental tone to many of the comments, particularly when related to consumer behavior. Many respondents noted that they are trying to be more conscious of health, ethical products and the environment in their purchase behaviors. They pointed to avoiding over-processed and genetically modified foods, products with excessive waste (disposable products and excessive packaging), and sustainable practices.
- e. A recurring theme was a desire to avoid products from low-wage and low regulation countries, in particular China. The distinct bias among the respondents is that products produced in China had low standards for labor, the environment and public health – particularly the health of the consumer.

**Key Point:** The overall concern for the environment expressed by many suggests the opportunity to position products from the fur industry in terms of ecological sustainability, natural, ethical practice, durability, and domestic, local content.

### 2. Trapping:

There is an unavoidable comparison between trapping and other forms of animal harvesting – including hunting, farming and even fishing.

- In contrast to these other forms of animal harvesting, trapping is less understood, and perceptions tend to be antiquated and/or based on imagery portrayed by opponents of the practice.

- There is very little understanding of the necessity or utility of trapping beyond a few limited purposes, such as relocating animals, or scientific and health purposes.
- When asked to consider the various purposes of trapping, responses could be placed on a hierarchy from necessary and desirable to frivolous and wrong.
  - Necessary trapping would include –
    - **population monitoring** for scientific reasons
    - **population control** to reduce conflicts and create balance
    - **relocation** – for animals that could pose a threat to a local community, but are seen as part of nature that should be preserved
  - Trapping that is less supported would include –
    - **trapping for pelts and food**
    - **trapping for sport**
- While most respondents were not opposed to sport hunting, or the consumption of meat, many did not see the utility of trapping and saw it as a less ethical method of capturing and harvesting an animal than hunting, or farming. Common arguments included:
  - Trapping is lazy version of hunting.
  - Trapping is a more economical version of farming.
  - Trapping is done for products that are frivolous (fur) wasteful (does not use the rest of the animal).
  - Trapping is less regulated than hunting – seasons, and more illegal trapping than hunting.
- **Key Points:** Faced with these preconceptions, participants seek alternatives to trapping – either hunting or traditional farming, depending on the context. Despite these concerns, they understood that there must be some regulation and most believed that an animal trapped in the US was probably done in a more humane way than would be done in other countries (esp. China).
- Posed with an ethical question of which is more humane – an animal living in captivity for its entire life and being raised for the purpose of being harvested (farming), or an animal living free for its entire life with the possibility of its demise in a trap – participants wanted to have both. Free range eggs have allowed people to bypass the ethical dilemma.

While there is not a large base of strong opposition to trapping, this is seen as a legacy practice which many people are not aware is still taking place beyond animal relocation and mouse traps. Educating people on modern trapping practices is a challenging undertaking because it could result in increasing awareness of trapping without improving perceptions of the practice.

### 3. Improving Trapping:

In the final analysis, the public is not opposed outright to trapping. Rather, they are opposed to the inhumane practices that they associate with trapping.

- For the respondents to believe that trapping is more ethical, there are several issues that they want to see addressed:
  - Quick retrieval of the animal
  - End the animal's life painlessly and quickly (humanely)
  - Use the entire animal (rather than trapping for "sport" which is perceived as an activity that could be wasting part or all of the animal).
- However, entering into a discussion wherein the main focus is the activity of trapping, rather than the benefits of the outcome becomes a process argument that is difficult to win.

**Key Point:** If the industry wants to change the stigma of trapping, this is probably better achieved by focusing on the product and benefits rather than the method. Discussions should lead off with the conservation and management activities conducted by agencies with trapping mentioned as the method some of the objectives are achieved.

### 4. Conclusions:

Given what we have observed in the course of the groups, in summary we would make the final conclusions for the industry:

- a. **Emphasize the outcome rather than the process** – Focus on the conservation objectives that are served by trapping, rather than trying to demonstrate the process in isolation.
- b. **Connect the trapping industry to the values of the public** – The fact that modern trapping is ethical and humane, with the best standards and regulations in the world.
- c. **Emphasize the main advantages of products derived from animals cultivated through trapping** – these products are durable, natural and domestically produced.

- d. **Technical arguments are complicated and difficult to win** – The most challenging aspect of these groups was trying to engage people in a conversation that they did not want to consider, how we cultivate animals for our benefit. The deeper you get into the details of why traps are safe and humane, the more you force people to think about a topic that makes them uncomfortable.
  
- e. **Build trust in the structure and oversight** – Rather than persuading people that traps are better, focusing on the rules, regulations and oversight (ie. Understanding that someone is making sure it is done “right”) is “safer” for the general public.

A successful persuasion effort is not one where people learn more about trapping and all of the technological and regulatory approvals that have been made. It is in understanding enough to feel that they can minimize any negative feelings they have when they purchase and use the products without being unnecessarily concerned about the method that got them to the product.

## Overall Issue Context:

Groups began with a broad discussion of the issues that were of concern to them – the general political context in America today:

- Covid was raised as an issue by some respondents. Respondents were both worried about the danger posed by the virus and concerned about the loss of freedom caused by the public response to the pandemic.
- There were recurring comments from respondents related to cost-of-living issues, including supply chain shortages. Many respondents felt that things have become harder to buy, more expensive and less abundant. This is affecting their day-to-day lives.
- Several respondents felt a growing sense of instability in the United States. Concern over widening political divisions, racial tension, high job turnover, and increasing crime in their communities were all symptomatic of the general unease.
- Several respondents also referenced issues related to the environment, living their lives more sustainably, eating healthier foods, avoiding genetically modified foods, and knowing the source of their food.
- In several groups, participants raised concerns about sourcing products from offshore, particularly China. Concerns related to geo-politics, but also quality and safety were expressed at various times.

### *Participants comments:*

- *“So yeah, I mean, a lot is going out the door for food. It's just a big mess.”*
- *“When I went to Target yesterday, the pickings were slim”.*
- *“I mean, it was hard to find any grocery items in stock, so it's like the beginning all over again where people seem to be just hoarding and stockpiling or something.”*

Issues related to animal welfare, hunting and trapping did not come up in any discussion as a top-of-mind concern. Rather, the issues context suggests a favorable environment for either the defense or continuation of trapping practices. Concerns related to prices, shortages, and sources of products we use and consume all lend themselves to sourcing more products locally and naturally.

## Shopping Habits:

Respondents were specifically asked about their shopping habits and changes in their shopping behaviors. While there was some mention of concerns around animal testing, the avoidance of wild trapped animal products or food was not mentioned. Participants' comments largely centered around a few recurring themes.

- Greater attention to sourcing “healthier” food options. This included both the perceived nutritional value of food (seeking out more fruits, vegetables, etc.), and the perceived safety of the food (avoiding GMOs, pesticides, added hormones, etc.)
- Being conscious of the environmental impact of their purchases. Choosing products that are more sustainable and ‘natural’ (fewer synthetics). One participant avoided “fast fashion” because of the negative environmental impacts, particularly in terms of the waste to raw materials and the increase in landfill.
- Politics influenced many respondents' shopping habits. Several respondents mentioned that they were avoiding products made in China, or seeking out products made in the United States. One participant indicated that they avoided purchasing Nike products because of the social/political causes they support.
- The welfare of animals was brought up, but not in relation to hunting. Several respondents sought out ‘free range’ meats, or ‘cruelty free’ makeup products.

### ***Participants comments:***

- *“I avoid the hormones in the meats. I tried to buy hormone free meat and I tried to buy free range eggs and you know all the all the artificial stuff I steer away from”*
- *“I'm becoming more and more concerned about sustainability. And as far as buying products, I'm becoming more concerned even how they're packaged... I'm frightened of climate change and that's connected to what I want to buy and purchase.”*
- *“I mean does feel a little bit hypocritical because I have been a consumer of this is what they call fast fashion. And going back to what some people were speaking about, you know, the most of it is produced mass produced in China. The sustainability aspect of that is pretty much zero.”*

## Awareness of Trapping:

Participants were asked about their awareness of trapping in their local community. Almost universally, there is a very limited awareness or understanding of wildlife trapping. Unless there was a first-hand experience with trapping, respondents were unaware of any trapping in their state. Some respondents raised doubts about whether trapping was still a widely practiced in the US.

- A limited number of participants based their understanding of trapping in a domestic context (i.e., trapping house mice, backyard racoons, or capturing wild animals in urban areas). Respondents who thought of trapping in a domestic context were generally ambivalent towards the practice.
- However, many respondents did not move beyond the imagery that the word “trapping” invokes. To the extent that trapping conjured any imagery beyond a domestic context, it related to animal suffering in traps, and animals being left for a prolonged period before the trapper returned. Respondents with this image of trapping were the most opposed to trapping generally.
- There is a very loose understanding of the reasons for trapping ranging from relocation, practical use (food, sale) and trapping for recreation.

### *Participant comments*

- *“I’m so unfamiliar with trapping. I really don’t know too much about it. I’ve I’ve never interacted with anyone that’s partaken in trapping. I don’t even know in New Jersey, what the rules and regulations are surrounding trapping.”*
- *“Well, I live in a very rural area. And like, for possums, raccoons, stuff like that, that are kind of a nuisance around your home, you trap them, and then you bring them way out in the country, and you let them loose out there to get them away from your home.”*
- *“I mean, if you’ve got pets, like you said, and we have coyotes around us, we live in a kind of a populated areas right here every night to three in the morning. Trying to protect your dog from when you take them off for a walk in the morning. So maybe trap them.”*
- *“Yeah, relocation. Some people probably do it for food. And money.”*
- *“Only thing that comes to mind for me when I think about trapping is just relocate. Or if there’s somewhere there’s a bunch of cats still trapping them to bring them to the vet to spay or neuter them and then they go back and let them go. But that’s the only trapping that I’m aware of around here.”*



## Regulation of Trapping:

Given the limited awareness of either the existence, or prevalence of trapping, the default assumption is that trapping is a regulated and limited practice.

- It was clear that participants assumed it is “well regulated” because they have not heard otherwise. If trapping was not being regulated, they would expect there to be public outcry. They have not heard any publicity related to trapping, so it must be well-regulated.

### *Participant comments*

- *“I believe it is [regulated] here in Florida. Florida is very strict on pretty much everything, but I don't really know because I don't go trapping.”*
- *“I'm not aware. I mean, I'm sure there is regulations”*
- *“I think that the Game Commission regulates it”*

Wordcloud:

Conversations in the focus groups were remarkably neutral.

- Emotive words are almost entirely absent. Negative words such as ‘cruel’, ‘hurt’, ‘pain’, or ‘death’ were barely used.
- Conversations remained high level. Most respondents were not informed enough on the topic to be emotionally invested on the topic.



## SUPPORT for Trapping:

Support for trapping is situational. Most participants were neither supportive or in opposition to animal trapping, rather they declined to be oppositional because they did not have information that told them otherwise.

- They assume trapping occurs for a legitimate purpose (i.e., food source, animal relocation) that otherwise could not be accomplished without the practice.
- Trapping for the removal or relocation of an animal was the most mentioned and positive purpose for wild trapping. Moving animals that are endangered or a nuisance is seen as logical and positive (something for their well-being).

However, it was clear from many of the comments by participants related to the practice of trapping suggested that:

- Trapping is a practice that is no longer done in any significant way,
- Trapping is less humane than hunting or farming,
- Trapping is more cruel and less fair to the animal than hunting,
- The most legitimate purpose of trapping is for relocation of animals.

Participants consistently drew comparisons between trapping and hunting and farming.

- **Farming** is not widely considered to be inhumane. Farming is widely accepted as a means relatively humane and common way of raising animals for food or other products.
- **Hunting** tends to be seen as mainstream – almost everyone either hunts or knows someone who hunts – and humane in that the animals have a fair chance at survival when shot at (if the hunter misses), and that the animal dies quickly when shot. Furthermore, animals live freely until they are hunted.
- **Trapping** is the least understood. Respondents do not understand the necessity of trapping, as compared to hunting or farming. They tend to view it as an antiquated relic of the past, not a modern practice. They tend to view it as less fair to the animal and less humane in practice. They believe this practice is relatively limited and passe.

### *Participant comments*

- *“I think you have animals that get overpopulated where they would be causing problems. And not only could they die, but there's a chance of increase in rabies in certain animals like raccoons and stuff like our and skunks and other animals. And they also could start, like a like around where I live, we have skunks that come up here around my house and cute raccoons too as well. And there have been times in...*

*...the last year where they found raccoons that had rabies. Okay, so I think trapping should be a more humane, more humane. And that's a way of controlling the disease and also population.”*

- *“Oh, yes, I support why? Well, it's a good way to control the population. And, like around here the hunters have an organization that they go hunting for like to kill the deer and what they do is they hunt for the hungry for the food bank around here. And all they have like one special day or one special weekend today all the hunters just go hunting for the deer and they'll take and carry I have the animal process and didn't get to meet to the food bank. But that way, they're helping their community, I believe. And it's also controlling the population of deer and oh animals around here as well. Because deer do cause a lot of destruction when they get into fields and or your car. Yeah, go in your car and go in your soybeans or stuff like that.”*

## OPPOSITION to Trapping:

Throughout the focus groups, there were two main challenges for the moderators that caused resistance by participants. The first set of challenges relate to the practical understanding of trapping –

- a) **Low Awareness** - People do not think about trapping so they are challenged to articulate their opinions.
  - a. They cannot formulate an opinion on the topic, so they grasp for reasons to oppose it, or they largely avoid the topic altogether.
  - b. To the extent that anyone thinks about it (which was limited), they conjure images of animals suffering in foothold traps with broken limbs.
- b) **Lack of Purpose** – Participants see trapping as either an antiquated practice, or worse still, an inhumane act because they do not see the utility of trapping.
  - a. Many people do not believe that anyone uses fur anymore.
  - b. To the extent that fur is needed, they would prefer that it be farmed.

Beyond the “practical understanding issues, participants expressed two sets of ethical challenges to wild trapping:

- 1) **Hunting animals for recreation.** In the broad category of hunting for sport, the idea of trapping occurs for recreation is largely unpalatable to most of the participants. There was little to no enthusiasm or support for the animal hunting for recreation that does not fulfill of larger purpose of use.
- 2) **Length of time an animal is in the trapping device.** The belief that animals that are trapped are left in a trap for a longer than necessary period was the largest oppositional point on wild trapping. This belief is largely grounded in participants image-based understanding of the practice. It is seen as cruel and inhumane.

### *Participant comments*

- *“Like, if the person was just trapping and killing and not using anything from the animal? Like, what was the purpose of doing that? You know?”*
- *“Are they are trapping just to kill the animal and then just leaving the carcass, wherever, and then just going about your business, because if that's the case, and that's cruel, but if you're trapping for a reason, I have family members that hunt. And when they hunt, they go places where every part of the animal is used. If an animal can't be used, then they don't hunt at all*
- *“I would support it as long as it's regulated so that they don't deplete the natural resources. In other words, they don't take or harvest too many animals.”*

## Implications for the Trapping Industry:

There are several practical challenges to the industry that we identified in the groups:

1. Public awareness of the existence of modern-day trapping is low and limited.
2. There is no perceived justifiable purpose for trapping beyond the relocation or removal of animals for human health and safety and population management and conservation.
3. While people presume that trapping is well-regulated, this needs to be stated to provide some level of support for the activity (prevent population declines).
4. Raising awareness of trapping, simply as a recreation activity, is risky and could backfire on the industry. Address trapping in terms of the many benefits it provides.

However, there are several positive implications for the industry:

- Consumer trends and attitudes could work in favor of animal trapping. Consumers expressed a desire to move away from –
  - “fast fashion”,
  - synthetic clothes,
  - Chinese products,
  - GMOs and additives in food (unnatural practices and ingredients).

Trapping is not the end; it is a means to the end. The end in this case is sustainable and natural products that are local and free of GMOs. Furthermore, unlike most farming, the animals are not raised in restrictive environments (pens) and are harvested to prevent over-population and disease.

Communication related to trapping should emphasize the ethical and beneficial outcomes, rather than attempting to educate the public about the practice itself. Consumers do not want to think of trapping as the means to fur products any more than they want to think about the slaughterhouse when they cook a steak.

Focus on the positive elements:

- **Environmental benefits** – arable land is not wasted on penning animals,
- **Wildlife benefits** – animals live their lives in freedom rather than captivity,
- **Health benefits** – proper population management of wildlife results in better health outcomes for the animals in general and allows for a healthy ecosystem,
- **Product benefits** – animals are not frivolously harvested. The entire animal is used, including the pelt.
- **Consumer benefits** – products made from animals are natural, strong, long-lasting and made using domestic sources.

**APPENDIX**  
**FOCUS GROUPS: MODERATOR'S GUIDE**

**SECTION: INTRODUCTION** [10 MINUTES]

- Introduce the moderator
- Introduce assignment and role of the focus group.
- Conduct of the discussion
  - *Not all at once, but do not need to wait for me to call on you.*
  - *Respect*
  - *No right or wrong answers.*
  - *Want to get individual thoughts and opinions—we're not looking for a consensus. Encourage individual group members to participate.*
- Recording and presence of observers.
  - *Assure participants we are not selling anything; this meeting is strictly for research purposes.*
  - *Confirm that individual responses will be kept confidential. The purpose is not to report on individuals, but instead to get a better understanding of opinions.*
- Roundtable Intros
  - *First name and a little bit about yourself*

**WARM UP:** [10 MINUTES]

- What are some of the things **you** are focused on these days?
- Thinking about your shopping habits, are there any types of products or foods that you avoid buying? Why?
  - What about wild game meat? Animal products or clothes?

**AWARENESS OF TRAPPING:** [20 MINUTES]

- Does trapping of animals for fur take place in your area of the country?
- Is it regulated (licenses, limits on how and how much)? Is it well regulated?
- Is wildlife properly managed in your state? Why?

**SUPPORT FOR TRAPPING:** [20 MINUTES]

- Overall, do you support or oppose the trapping of wild animals?
  - For food, population control, to reduce damage to property or crops, fur, biological study, to move the animals?
- Recreational trapping or trapping for business, is one better?
- When an animal is trapped, is the entire animal used? (fur, meat to clothes, cosmetic, soap)

**SUSTAINABILITY [20 MINUTES]**

- Have you heard of any efforts by fish and wildlife agencies or government to improve trapping? What are they doing?
- Should trapping be made more humane or banned all together?
- Do you support or oppose more humane traps?
- Does knowing about that more humane trapping efforts are underway affect your view of trapping?

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME  
CONCLUSION**