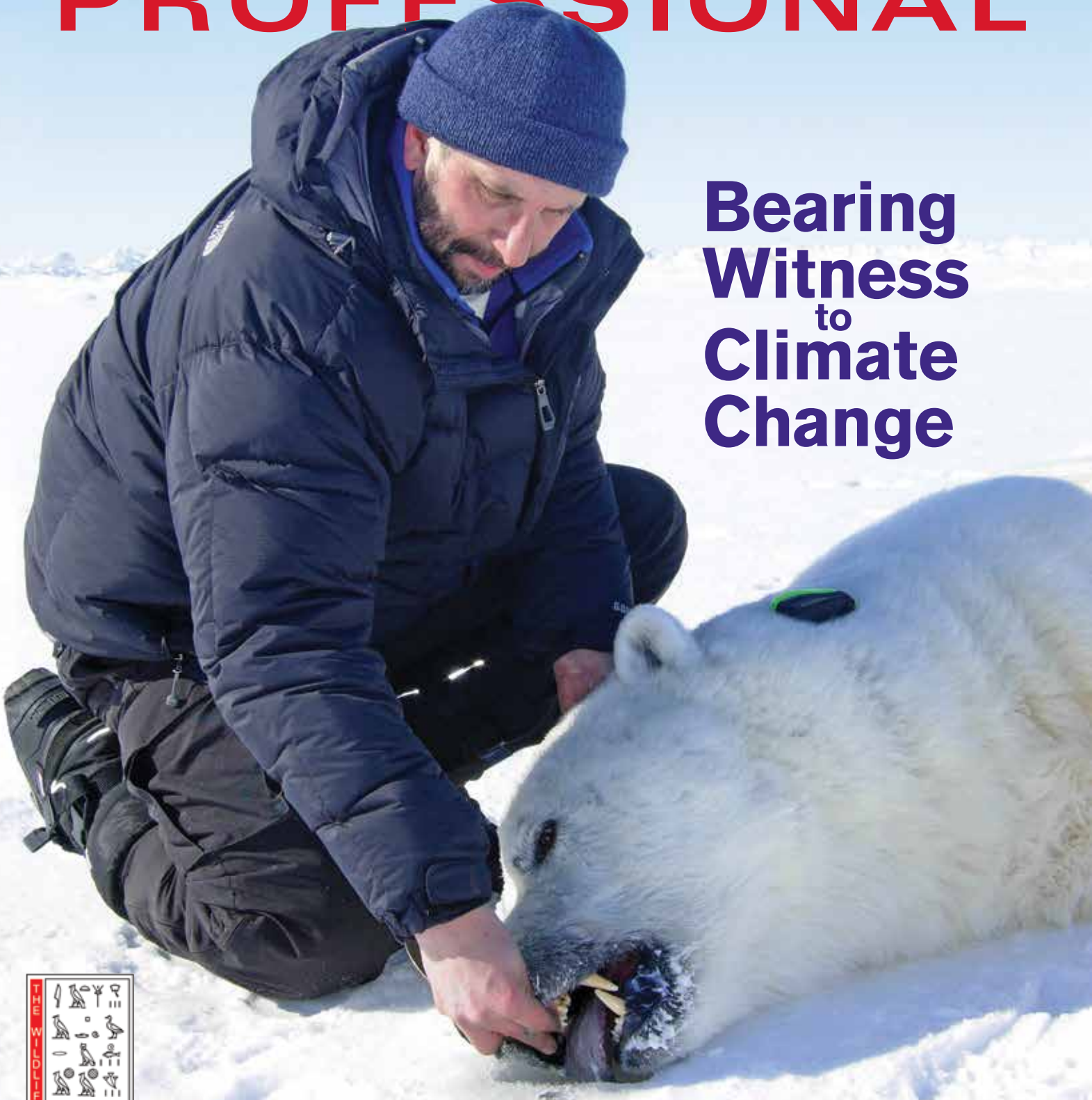


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Trapping in Wildlife Conservation

HOW READY ARE WILDLIFE PROFESSIONALS FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH THE PUBLIC?

By H. Bryant White, Zachary Lowe and Samara Trusso

Petroglyphs tens of thousands of years old depict early humans capturing, utilizing and celebrating wild animals through hunting and trapping. These rock engravings must have represented events of great cultural significance for early humans to memorialize them on the walls of their dwellings. In the United States today, capturing and utilizing wild animals are still highly valued and important practices that are guided by the principles of sustainability defined in the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation ([Organ 2010](#)).

Despite its many uses for animal damage control, research, restoration, disease monitoring, and fur and meat harvesting, capturing animals in traps is highly controversial and vulnerable to misinformation. Human dimensions studies indicate that the

public knows little about regulated trapping or the impact it has on wildlife populations ([Organ et al. 2015](#), [D.J. Case and Associates 2009](#)). Many wildlife professionals aren't very familiar either. The most recent data from 2004 revealed that only 142,287 trapping licenses were sold nationally ([Responsive Management 2005](#)), a number that has likely remained about the same today. With its low public use compared to popular hunting and fishing methods of take, trapping practices do not receive a lot of emphasis in state game and fish agencies.

As a result, it can be especially challenging when a contentious public issue about trapping comes up. In our experience, wildlife professionals need to periodically revisit how furbearer management impacts wildlife populations and habitats as well as human health, safety and property, to ensure its value in wildlife conservation and management is not lost or misunderstood. Such conversations may be difficult when emotions run high. However, being prepared with the facts about scientifically sound practices and knowing how to empathize with the public's perceptions go a long way to dealing with their concerns.

Public Perceptions

Surveys suggest that the public is misinformed and often unaware of even the most basic reasons for trapping. National and state studies show that knowledge about regulated trapping is very limited, with 70 – 80 percent of the U.S. populace indicating they know nothing or very little about it ([D.J. Case and Associates 2009](#)). When no specific reason for trapping is provided as context, 59 percent of respondents across the U.S. disapprove of the practice while only 34 percent approve ([Duda and Young, 1998](#)).

But approval ratings shift dramatically when even the most basic of information



Credit: Bryant White

Missouri Department of Conservation Wildlife Veterinarian Kelly Straka and Resource Assistant Justan Blair check the reflex responses of a chemically immobilized coyote before performing further measurements. The Midwestern coyote was live caught with a cable restraint device.



is interjected into the process. Nationally, nearly 67 percent of people approve when trapping is conducted for reasons such as a biological study or animal damage and population control. These findings demonstrate that when people have even minimal knowledge about the reasons for trapping, their opinions switch from opposition to support. More recent statewide studies report similar findings ([Responsive Management 2012](#), [Responsive Management 2014](#)).

Much like hunting, the public's approval rating soars to 80 percent when the purpose of trapping is obtaining meat, whether for human consumption, pet food or animal rendering ([Responsive Management 2001](#)). However, there are taboos and issues with certain furbearer species such as mink, skunk and coyote being consumed by humans. But other species including beaver, raccoon, muskrat, nutria, opossum and bobcat are considered local delicacies and therefore more accepted in certain regions of the U.S.

Human dimensions surveys and focus groups on trapping also reveal that two of the public's greatest apprehensions about trapping center on animal welfare and selectivity. Common questions include: Can traps avoid or reduce captures of unintended animals? Can captured animals be restrained and released without significant injury and are animals dispatched from lethal traps in a way that is quick and humane?

Scientific Support

Wildlife professionals have made substantial efforts to evaluate these issues scientifically and



Credit: Jamie McFadden-Hiller

improve trapping over the last few decades. In fact, trapping is the only form of consumptive wildlife use that has an international standard by which tools and techniques are evaluated specifically for animal welfare ([International Organization for Standardization 1999](#)).

In 1997, state fish and wildlife agencies, in conjunction with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, U.S. Department of Agriculture APHIS Wildlife Services, and a number of other organizations embarked on an ambitious plan to advance the science and to develop [best management practices](#) for the U.S. ([White, et al. 2010](#), [White, et al. 2015](#)). This best management practices program evaluates both live-restraining and lethal traps

Tim Hiller, carnivore-furbearer coordinator for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, releases the first kit fox ever captured and radio-marked in the state. The research project, which involved trapping, sought to evaluate resource selection in an area subject to wildfires, energy development and other anthropogenic factors that may affect this sensitive desert canid at the northernmost extent of their distribution.

Tips for Holding Public and Professional Trapping Discussions

Based on the public attitude surveys, focus group analyses and professional communications workshops, three key points — sanctioned, scientific and solutions — about the place of trapping in wildlife management have emerged that will help guide discussions with the public, as well as among professionals.

Sanctioned. Regulated trapping is sanctioned by state fish and wildlife agencies. It is critically important for people to know that state agencies manage trapping activities with numerous laws and regulations — including seasons and bag limits. Law officers enforce these, and many states require trapper certification before a license is issued.

Scientific. Regulated trapping is supported by well-established science. Helping the public understand that best management practices founded on scientific research lessens their concerns about inhumane capture and harvesting of animals.

Solutions. Regulated trapping provides direct tangible benefits to society and the natural resources community. Reassuring people that trapping is used to help monitor, protect, manage and restore wildlife and habitats as well as reduce localized disease outbreaks helps reduce misconceptions. In many cases, regulated trapping also provides an important balance between wildlife and people.



Courtesy of Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

This line drawing by Joe Goodman shows a coyote, a frequently trapped furbearer in the U.S. The drawing appeared on the cover of the Eastern Coyote Best Management Practice published in 2003 by AFWA. Today, 21 species-specific guides on best management practices are available on AFWA's website.

Opportunities to Learn More

The Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation and AFWA have formed a cooperative partnership to provide professional development opportunities focused on trapping for wildlife professionals employed by state, federal and tribal agencies as well as by academic institutions. Their goal is to ensure that wildlife professionals have the tools they need to effectively discuss regulated trapping and its positive impact on wildlife conservation.

Both a Fur Management School and Trapping Matters Workshop are being hosted regionally across the U.S. in 2015-16. The four-day Fur Management School covers topics such as best management practices, trapping techniques, regulations, and furbearer ecology, management and utilization as well as effective communication techniques and strategies. The shorter, one-day Trapping Matters Workshops focus on best management practices in harvesting furbearers and specific communication skills needed to engage in informed conversations about regulated trapping, furbearer ecology, and trapping in the conservation of wildlife resources. For more information, contact Zachary Lowe at zach@clft.org.

In addition, a workshop — which will also be offered at the [TWS 22nd Annual Conference in Winnipeg](#) on Saturday, Oct. 17, 2015 — includes a detailed review of the human dimensions research and will teach attendees how to communicate effectively about all of these topics. Interested individuals can register for the workshop on the [TWS Annual Conference website](#).

based on five criteria: animal welfare, selectivity, safety, efficiency and practicality. These practices have improved trapping standards, policies and the ability for U.S. trappers to engage in international trade ([White et al. 2015](#)). Twenty-one species-specific trapping best practices are now available on the AFWA website.

Getting Informed

An abundance of information and support for trapping in the wildlife profession already exists in the form of position statements, written policies and defined management protocols. The Wildlife Society's [standing position statement](#) supports regulated trapping and provides background information to help inform members. Other professional groups such as the [American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians](#), [American Veterinary Medical Association](#), and [AFWA](#) also support trapping practices.

Using the Right Information

As wildlife professionals, we first need to understand the public's viewpoint on trapping and then empathize with them. Two feelings that clearly emerged from human dimensions studies are that the public cares deeply about America's wildlife resources and that they do not take killing of animals lightly ([Responsive Management 2001](#)), both of which are shared with our profession.

When it comes to caring about wildlife, the public finds comfort and acceptance in knowing that trapping activities are highly regulated. Using the term "regulated trapping" whenever possible helps respond to these concerns. Letting people know that state conservation agencies regulate trapping to promote the most humane capture of wildlife by requiring frequent — and in most states daily — trap check intervals, restricting trap sizes and sets that may endanger pets and the public, and prohibiting certain types of traps helps the public to better understand and accept trapping. Providing assurance that trapping laws are enforced and that regulated trapping seasons occur during the times of year when young are no longer dependent on parents also is helpful.

Another way to ease disapproval of trapping is to make people aware that regulated trapping can be used to benefit wildlife through research or restoration projects. Studies show that such uses receive a 76 percent approval rating ([Responsive Management 2001](#), [D.J. Case and Associates 2009](#)). It is important to assure the public that regulated trapping does not



cause species to become threatened, endangered or go extinct. Informing them that trapping is used to restore and research numerous well-loved wildlife populations such as river otters, Canada lynx, wolves and beavers, and even threatened and endangered species also generates greater public approval.

Increasingly, society today has a keen awareness of animal welfare in everything from how livestock is raised to how pets are treated in animal shelters. Survey respondents identified that it is important that animals captured in lethal traps have a quick and humane death and that animals captured in live restraint traps be released in good condition ([Responsive Management 2001](#)). These two concerns for animal welfare further support the need for using documented best management procedures for trapping wild animals.

Stepping Up

Much like early humans celebrated wild animals in their culture, today's public also holds this natural resource in high regard. It is our responsibility as wildlife professionals to ensure that appropriate science and animal welfare concerns guide the policies surrounding contemporary practices of animal take. Being well-informed about trapping practices is just one of the ways we can engage in meaningful conversations with the public as well as each other that will ultimately benefit wildlife and society. ■



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