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An Elevator Pitch for Trapping

SOME KEY MESSAGES CAN HELP US COMMUNICATE REGULATED TRAPPING'S ROLE IN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

By Samara Trusso

If you had 60 seconds to tell someone about regulated trapping in wildlife management, what would you say?

Even though trapping is widely used as a management tool, many wildlife professionals have a lot of questions about it and feel unprepared to talk about it. If we're going to maintain regulated trapping in wildlife management efforts, we must do a better job educating ourselves.

“Regulated trapping” means the activity of trapping furbearers is managed through regulations and laws that are enforced by state, provincial and federal natural resource agencies. From bobcats to sea turtles, prairie pothole wetlands to urban neighborhoods, it is used for the conservation and management of a wide range of species across a variety of habitats. Academic institutions, government agencies and nongovernmental organizations all use regulated trapping for research and management purposes.

Indeed, The Wildlife Society has a position statement recognizing the importance of maintaining the regulated use of trapping as a safe, efficient and acceptable means of managing and harvesting wildlife for the benefits it provides while ensuring the welfare of wildlife. The American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians recognizes regulated trapping as a legitimate tool. On its website, the American Veterinary Medical Association refers to using and developing trapping best management practices (BMPs). State and federal agencies have invested millions of dollars to research and identify the most selective, efficient and humane traps and trapping



Credit: Lisa Hupp/USFWS

practices for trapping BMPs. With this level of professional support, why is trapping controversial?

For many years, trapping was the target of animal rights campaigns that were able to sow doubt in the absence of good information about animal welfare. Beginning in the 1990s, the development of trapping BMPs by state and federal fish and wildlife agencies helped fill that gap with research-based recommendations about humane traps and capture methods for each furbearer in the United States.

As wildlife professionals, we must understand the mechanics of trapping and its role in conservation. Only by educating ourselves can we ensure that we can effectively communicate the conditions under which we regulate and approve its use.

Most support regulated trapping

For decades, the wildlife profession has used human dimensions to assess attitudes and understanding about regulated trapping involving wildlife professionals and the public (see the AFWA furbearer management webpage for more information). Recent polls suggest that support for regulated trapping ranges from 52% to 77% among adult Americans responding to telephone surveys. The sampling was designed to capture variation due to

▲ A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist carries a sedated Canada lynx.



► A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officer checks the license of a trapper.

Credit: Brett Billings/USFWS

cultural or socioeconomic influences. In this way, we believe we have captured a spectrum of environmental values. Through these surveys, we learned that animal welfare is a concern for all groups, as is selectivity. It was also evident that the benefits of regulated trapping are not always well understood. In short, people are more supportive of trapping when they know it is a regulated activity (it is). They want to know furbearer populations are not at risk of becoming endangered due to trapping (they aren't) and that regulations are enforced (they are). Finally, the benefits provided by regulated trapping must align with their values.

We also learned that people's opinions of regulated trapping, and their responses to information about it, differ from other environmental issues in two ways. First, providing information about regulated trapping improved attitudes about it. Lack of information seemed to be a hurdle to acceptance. Once information was provided, people generally agreed with public participation in this regulated activity. This is different from other conservation issues, in which educational programming is often not enough to change attitudes.

Second, although many Americans don't respond well to "regulation" in other contexts, the controversial nature of trapping makes the regulatory message more resonant. Americans generally support the use of animals so long as welfare protections are in place. Knowing someone is enforcing regulations about the method of take, check times and seasons addresses those core values and is

useful for achieving acceptance. More than one American environmental typology describes the values that influence how we respond to different environmental and wildlife management issues. Some typologies are more inclined to be supportive of — or at least not opposed to — regulated trapping. Within these, the perceived benefit or reason impacts their acceptance of the activity. Others are unlikely to accept trapping for any purpose.

Combining these survey results with trapping BMP research, four key messages were developed to build trust and credibility. We wanted to address concerns about regulated trapping as well as convey the best available science regarding it. Once developed, these messages were tested using focus groups and telephone survey instruments to ensure understanding both among specific constituencies with whom we were communicating and across the broad spectrum of values held by the American public. The messages were tested to see if they resonated with the public, and to find out if specific words, phrases or concepts elicited a strong response and should either be integrated or avoided. The intention is to provide valuable, factual information about regulated trapping while establishing a foundation for dialog. That said, none of these messages is likely to influence the attitudes of people who have strong values opposing animal use, including those strongly opposed to legal hunting or regulated trapping.

When conveying these concepts, remember that relatable examples make positive impressions. On an individual level, active listening can help identify common ground during conversations. When communicating on a broad scale, it is important to take steps to analyze and understand your audience. You can then link the messages and tailor examples and supporting information more directly to those values that you share. It is also important to revisit the messages and underlying attitudes on a regular basis to ensure they remain compatible. Public agencies should know that taking the effort to understand your audience's perspective can improve trust and credibility among constituents.

Key messages

1. Trapping is managed through scientifically based regulations that are strictly enforced by conservation officers.

Trapping is as regulated as hunting, if not more so, and its regulations include a variety of techniques,



such as the season a species may be legally harvested, the number that can be taken, the trapping devices that may be used and how and where those devices may be used. Furthermore, research over the past two decades has identified the best traps and techniques for 23 North American furbearer species. This information is reflected in regulations throughout the U.S. and Canada. There are also licensing requirements and, for many species, tagging programs that require mandatory harvest reporting to state agencies.

State and federal wildlife conservation officers are the most recognizable enforcers of wildlife laws. Penalties for violations can range from fines to jail time, or a combination. Some even result in license suspension across 45 states through the Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact. On the academic and research side, trapping is further regulated by animal welfare statutes that call for use of the most humane, selective and efficient capture devices available.

Tip: *Become familiar with at least the most basic trapping regulations in your state. Do trappers have to label their traps? Are there areas where trapping is prohibited or species that are protected? Understanding some basic regulations will help you further the conversation. It is also important for the nontrapping public to understand their responsibility in minimizing conflicts. For example, by complying with rules about keeping dogs leashed in multiple-use areas during certain seasons, conflicts with regulated trapping can be avoided.*

2. Agencies are continually reviewing and developing rules, regulations, education programs and capture methods to ensure the humaneness of trapping.

People are concerned about animal welfare. This was among the motivations for state and federal fish and wildlife agencies to develop BMPs for trapping. Traps were tested using an internationally recognized research scale for assessing animal welfare. Trapping BMPs provide species-specific information about tools and techniques that are humane, selective and efficient. These BMPs have been incorporated into trapper education programs, professional development materials such as TWS' Techniques Manual and agency regulations throughout the United States and Canada, all of which are updated when new information becomes available.

Key Messages in Trapping in Furbearer Management

- 1) Trapping is managed through scientifically based regulations that are strictly enforced by conservation officers.
- 2) Agencies are continually reviewing and developing rules, regulations, education programs and capture methods to ensure the humaneness of trapping.
- 3) The kinds of wildlife that are trapped are abundant. Regulated trapping does not cause wildlife to become endangered.
- 4) Regulated trapping provides many benefits to wildlife and people in our state, especially in helping maintain a balance between wildlife and people.



Credit: Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife



Credit: Peter Pearsall/USFWS

▲ Traps have been used for highly successful gray wolf and river otter restoration programs.



Tip: First, look at your state's education programs and compare them to trapping BMPs. Are they aligned? Second, related to animal welfare, remember that shared concerns about humanness among wildlife professionals and the public helped instigate the BMP effort. Think about how those shared values provide opportunity to build understanding. Shared experiences are important, particularly for those who work in public agencies and are acting in the public trust.

3. The species of wildlife that are trapped are abundant. Regulated trapping does not cause wildlife to become endangered.

Most furbearer populations are the highest they've been in more than a century, meaning they are not endangered. As previously noted, modern regulations provide a solid framework for managing both the activity and the species. These regulations ensure populations do not decline unintentionally.

Tip: Population status can be confusing. Be sure your audience knows what you mean by "abun-

dant" and "endangered." As wildlife professionals we take the definitions for granted, but it is jargon. Give an example of an endangered species and then compare it to a common, abundant animal in your state that can be trapped during a regulated season.

4. Regulated trapping provides many benefits to wildlife and people in our state, especially in maintaining a balance between wildlife and people.

The recovery plans for several threatened and endangered species include trapping. In some cases, this is through the trapping and translocation of animals. Many people do not realize that foothold traps were used to capture river otters (*Lontra canadensis*) and gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) for highly successful restoration programs. In other cases, trapping is used to reduce local populations of predators, such as raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*) and red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) that impact sea turtle nests and ground-nesting birds or to enhance habitat restoration efforts, such as removing invasive nutria (*Myocastor coypus*) that destroy coastal wetlands. Regulated trapping is also used to monitor population abundance and health and can help us learn about species that may be challenging to study otherwise.

Regulated trapping can help mitigate human-wildlife conflicts that affect infrastructure, such as flooding caused by beavers (*Castor canadensis*), or cause agricultural damage, such as crop loss or livestock depredation. At the same time, individuals who participate in trapping develop challenging outdoor skills that can be used to solve problems and to sustainably harvest furbearers. In fact, wildlife researchers often work with seasoned trappers to learn what makes for the most humane and efficient captures.

Tip: Can you think of a successful wildlife restoration story, or a cool bit of research that involved trapping? Or maybe a story of a problem solved — like a road that had been consistently flooded out and made inaccessible until the beavers were removed? Having a relatable example in mind is a great way to put this message into practice. If you are developing broad communications programming, you may want to formalize this process. You could have a brainstorming session with a cross section of your staff to come up with stories that might resonate with your target audiences or use



Credit: Tess McBride

► This nutria was trapped as part of a study of the species' behavior, but often they are captured to reduce their damage to wildlife, property and the environment.



social media metrics to assess what is of interest to your online communities.

Shaping the message

Now you know *what* to say, but are you comfortable with *how* you are saying it? Are you the right person to speak about this topic? In surveys and focus groups, wildlife professionals are identified as the best spokespeople about wildlife issues. And if you are employed by a state or federal fish and wildlife agency, you are consistently identified as the most credible, trusted source of information about wildlife issues. Regardless, we are obliged to be informed and know how to communicate about this controversial issue because what we say counts.

Speaking of what we say, our words matter. Among the things you didn't see in the descriptions of benefits of trapping were making money, fur for clothing, tradition or recreation. Are these reasons people trap? Sure. But these reasons score low in our surveys for acceptable reasons, and they were dismissed in focus groups. Historically, these were among the first things wildlife professionals said about trapping. But because people don't support trapping for these reasons, we weren't bridging the information divide. They aren't relatable to most people. Rather than starting a conversation, these topics can shut it down.

With that in mind, being empathetic and realistic is critical when dealing with this controversial and often misunderstood topic. Use real examples. Don't exaggerate. Regulated trapping won't solve all wildlife-related issues and it isn't perfect, but it is an important tool for managing wildlife. If possible, take a trapper education class or attend a Trapping Matters workshop. Be familiar with the tools and techniques even if you don't use them yourself.

Knowing the key messages is a first step. To really promote understanding of the role and importance of regulated trapping in wildlife management, wildlife professionals need to include this topic in comprehensive communication plans. Recently, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) finalized a template that state agencies and other partners can use to incorporate regulated trapping in their broader outreach and education initiatives. The model plan provides a comprehensive and measurable approach to effectively communicate about trapping. The goal is to maintain the regulated use of trapping as a safe, efficient and humane means of



Credit: John and Karen Hollingsworth/USFWS

◀ A wildlife refuge employee sets a beaver trap. Beavers can cause significant damage to property and infrastructure and trapping has been an effective means of managing their populations.

managing and harvesting wildlife for the benefits it provides while ensuring the welfare of wildlife. The model includes a variety of methods for doing this, including continuing education for wildlife professionals, trapper education, social media outreach, school programs and other methods designed to improve understanding among a variety of audiences.

Are you intrigued? If so, check out the other articles about regulated trapping in this issue of *The Wildlife Professional*. Also, keep an eye out for Trapping Matters workshops held at TWS and TWS units' annual conferences. These daylong workshops provide continuing education units toward maintaining TWS certification, describe how regulated trapping is used in wildlife management, include demonstrations of BMP-approved traps and techniques and provide a foundation for effective communications based on the key messages. And you can ask all the questions that you want. Maybe I'll see you there! ■



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