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Trapping's Past, Present and Future

FINDING THE FACTS BEYOND THE CONTROVERSIES

By Tim L. Hiller and Adam A. Ahlers

▼ Bobcats aren't federally threatened or endangered, but the exportation of pelts is subject to requirements outlined by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora due to their similarity of appearance with certain rare species. As a result, state wildlife agencies have been collecting long-term data to help monitor the species.

Within wildlife management, conservation and research, few topics may be more controversial than trapping.

There have been elaborate multimedia marketing campaigns funded by anti-trapping and anti-fur organizations designed to sway public opinion on this important issue. For those with no background associated with trapping, this topic may conjure up thoughts of cruel mishandling of furbearing wildlife species, indiscriminate mortality, apprehension about unintended captures of pets or other animals, antiquated management methods without purpose and possibly even concerns about human safety.

If this was the reality of trapping, how could such an activity possibly persist today? Why would anyone allow this? As with most controversial topics, there are two sides to every story. And sometimes

our understanding of controversial topics can be highly distorted if the information we use to form our opinions contains inaccuracies, is outdated or is agenda driven.

Whether or not an individual believes in the use of trapping for wildlife research, reducing damage, recovering endangered species or for furbearer management is certainly their prerogative. We would argue, however, that attitudes and behaviors should be informed by using all available information that is accurate for these topics. Trapping often serves as an example where public perception and attitudes have shifted in the absence — or perhaps the availability — of such information.

As wildlife professionals, one of our responsibilities is to provide full and accurate information for stakeholders and decision makers. Here, we attempt to convey accurate information in terms of the past, present and future of trapping so that decisions about this important wildlife management tool and regulated activity may be better informed.

An unregulated past

As with hunting, fishing and many other activities, trapping was unregulated before the birth of modern wildlife management around the 1930s. It was an era of widespread unregulated overexploitation of our natural resources from which some ecosystems and wildlife communities are still recovering. European settlers expanded into vast territories of North America, in part, due to the abundance of furbearing species in those regions (Dolan 2011). French trappers, hired by the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company, canoed their harvested North American beaver (*Castor*



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canadensis) pelts from the interior of Canada to trading posts across the Great Lakes. English trappers sought out abundant beaver populations in the western United States and established trading posts in many areas of the Rocky Mountains and beyond. A vibrant market for North American furs facilitated the push for westward expansion, and many tools and techniques not allowed today were utilized by these early trappers.

Widespread landscape changes — including deforestation and agricultural production, unregulated trapping practices and nonexistent harvest management programs — contributed to population declines for many species. Trappers of this era were not bounded by trapping seasons or any other regulations, and they had no knowledge of sustainable harvest estimates or animal welfare data for any of the species they harvested. They were driven primarily by fur markets, and if markets changed or high-demand species became rare or extirpated, they refocused their efforts.

Many of the traps used during this era are now obsolete. Crudely designed foothold traps (often incorrectly referred to as “leghold” traps) were often engineered with jagged teeth thought to more securely restrain an animal’s foot. These toothed-jaw traps have been relegated to that era and are now merely collectibles to be hung on the wall. In the past, traps were used for a wide range of species, regardless of size, and placed in areas without regard for nontarget species or a humane capture. Modern modifications and techniques were not available to the trappers of the past. Pan tension devices to exclude smaller species, center swiveling and offset jaws to reduce capture-related injuries and new traps designs, including lethal rotating-jaw traps and foot-encapsulating traps, did not exist.

Realizing that many of North America’s fauna were disappearing, states and provinces enacted regulations to curb the overharvesting of many species. These regulations were consistent with Theodore Roosevelt’s Doctrine of Conservation and Aldo Leopold’s works, and they included restrictions such as individual harvest limits for some species, defining biologically relevant trapping seasons and prohibiting harvest of species in need of recovery. They also included reevaluating the tools and techniques used by trappers.



Courtesy Fur Institute of Canada

◀ The Fur Institute of Canada commonly applies a mechanical testing protocol to verify that traps conform with requirements under the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards.

Closer to the present, agencies enacted species-specific management goals to include active restoration of some species most affected by overharvest, habitat loss, and other factors. These highly successful management efforts have resulted in expanding populations of beaver, river otter (*Lontra canadensis*), fisher (*Pekania pennanti*), gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) and American marten (*Martes americana*), to name a few. Many regions now have viable populations of these furbearers that may be harvested through highly regulated trapping.

Today’s science and standards

Modern-day furbearer management has evolved into something much different from what occurred in the past. The perceptions about past trapping practices, however, often linger like skunk essence and are formed by inaccuracies and biases. Aside from avocational fur harvesting, modern-day trapping has allowed the expansion of service-based private animal control businesses and the wildlife damage management program utilized by the



Credit: Internet Archive Book Images

▲ Unregulated before the birth of modern wildlife management, trapping initiated a vibrant market for North American furs, but it often used tools and techniques not allowed today.

United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Wildlife Services program (WS). Some states have agreements in place with WS to regulate these activities. Private wildlife control companies, WS, and state wildlife agencies have been instrumental in maintaining the health and safety of humans, livestock and property.

Today, wildlife management agencies use science-based management in their furbearer and damage management programs, although constraints have made it difficult to keep pace with some species. State agencies have limited resources, and conducting research across the diversity of furbearing species quickly becomes logistically challenging (Hiller et al. 2018).

However, the collection of long-term harvest data has helped reduce this gap in many ways. Harvest data are relatively inexpensive to obtain compared to extensive field studies. The process directly involves trappers and hunters as stakeholders with an understanding of the importance of these data. Many states have collected these data for decades, providing a rich dataset to investigate basic questions about population dynamics of many species. Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) data, for instance, are routinely collected to monitor export and status because of the species' physical similarity to endangered felid species in other countries. Contemporary statistical techniques now allow professionals to analyze

these data and make inferences about key population demographics, although, of course, field studies continue to provide valuable information and are critical for decision-making within furbearer management programs.

More than two decades ago, two substantial trap-testing programs were initiated. Canada ratified the [Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards \(AIHTS\)](#), with trap-testing being led by the Fur Institute of Canada. Based on identical testing protocols, the United States established the [Best Management Practices for Trapping \(BMPs\)](#), led by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Both countries continue partnering on efforts today to provide science-based information.

Although Canada and the United States had conducted prior trap-testing studies, the AIHTS and BMPs enhanced the landscape by evaluating hundreds of trap models for 23 species of furbearers. Both programs are based on internationally agreed-upon humane testing standards of which animal welfare is a key criterion. These programs directly address the Wild Fur Regulation passed by the European Union in 1991, which would have ended fur trade with any country that did not ban foothold traps or that did not have humane trap-testing standards.

Despite this agenda-driven regulation, the AIHTS and BMP programs have clearly shown that many models of traps, including footholds, can be used in a humane, selective and efficient way. Extensive testing also revealed that some traps do not meet these international standards for certain species. This information has been extremely valuable for decision-makers, whether they are policymakers, wildlife professionals, trappers or the public. This information also has been immensely important for state, provincial and national trapper education courses.

A challenging future

Because of the extensive work to develop and implement these two trap-testing programs, evolving legislation and dynamic agency management goals, modern trapping has become one of the most regulated outdoor activities in North America (White et al. 2015). The present finds us with a very different picture of trapping and furbearer management, but much work remains. The U.S. and Canada have



different challenges in providing opportunities for trappers. Large areas available to trappers in the United States occur on private lands, and individuals must acquire landowner permission to access those properties. Conversely, the norm for provinces in Canada is to utilize a registered trapline system where only one individual can trap in a designated province-owned area.

Challenges to state management authority of wildlife also continue, including through state legislation and ballot initiatives, and these may become more prevalent. As one trapper mentioned in terms of ballot initiatives, “They only have to win once.” That leaves us with the realization of how difficult it can be to make current regulations less restrictive, including using evidence from trap testing to expand use of appropriate trap models or, more accurately, to overturn a successful ballot initiative through another initiative or other legislative processes. More than 20 years ago, Massachusetts banned foothold traps and cable restraints, and it limited the use of body-gripping traps for furbearer research and management. These laws remain on the books, despite several attempts to overturn them, and they have hindered subsequent research and management of furbearers in the state.

Very recent efforts include a citizen petition to prohibit trapping bobcats in Colorado. This petition made numerous claims directly challenging the management authority of Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). It appears that the CPW Commission recognized this, as they voted 10 to 0 against the petition, although this issue is likely to appear again in the future. Despite limited resources, trapping organizations put in a lot of time and effort to address these issues. Unfortunately, although state agencies are wildlife management experts, they typically are prevented from directly addressing these issues due to their political nature.

Participation in fur trapping has actually increased to 176,573 trappers during 2015 compared to an estimated 142,287 trappers during 2004, and there remains a strong appreciation of nature and the lifestyle it affords for many participants ([Responsible Management 2015](#)). Many trappers — through local, state and national organizations — advocate for regulated harvest of furbearing species and are leaders in trapper education, such as [efforts by Fur Takers of America](#).

Through the AIHTS, BMPs and regulated harvest-management programs, trappers continue to appreciate this activity every year. Although trappers are not largely driven by the economics of harvest, trapping does contribute \$2.5 billion annually to the U.S. economy. Ensuring continued participation in trapping will include continued active involvement and expansion of workshops focused on trapper education by agencies, trapping organizations and NGOs. Additionally, actively educating wildlife professionals about trapping, and effectively conveying accurate trapping information to the public, is also necessary. This is being accomplished through several ways, such as the popular Trapping Matters Workshops, which are often held with chapter meetings of TWS and other professional meetings.

Widespread agency interest in R3 programs (e.g., www.nationalr3plan.com) has resulted in actions to recruit, retain and reactivate hunters and recreational shooters. These actions include collaborations with nonprofit groups such as the National Wild Turkey Federation and Pheasants Forever to increase participation in hunting and shooting activities through research, focused marketing efforts, and hands-on workshops. The Wildlife Society [recently supported](#) a bill that would allow money generated through the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, better known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, to enhance R3 efforts across the United States.

Similar R3 programs related to trapping may be necessary to ensure that we maintain a consistent population of trappers into the future, and we recommend pursuit of such an endeavor. ■



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