

Charlie Dobbins Scholarship Winner
Fur Trapping – An American Heritage
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Fur trapping is part of our American heritage. Trappers were found in all parts of the new frontier and are often referred to in textbooks as important individuals who were liaisons between the pioneers and the Native Americans. The furs which were taken for thousands of years through trapping provided warmth in the form of clothing, blankets, and shelter. Scott Hartman of the National Trapping Association states that “for North America’s more than one-half million trappers, the purpose of trapping varies – from assisting wildlife biologists in furbearer studies, to population and disease control, protection against soil erosion, and for food, clothing, and income. And yet, thanks to good management practices, furbearers are more numerous in North America today than 100 years ago. The public needs to know that there is no trapping of endangered species and that we continue to research and encourage the use of the most effective and humane trapping techniques.”

Where humans interact with wildlife habitat in countless ways, management of certain animal populations will always be required. Often uninformed people think that trapping always dispatches an animal. This is not always the case. Yes, there are traps to permanently remove an animal from the premises. Dispatching an animal or animals from an area regardless of the area’s size not only removes the animals, but it serves several other purposes. Frequently, trapping reduces problems when they become too numerous and/or cause trouble for humans or their own populations. This also helps to reduce threats to human or pet health and safety by reducing exposure to disease. Wildlife can also serve as sources for disease (like rabies and tularemia), which are potentially dangerous to humans. Mange, rabies, parasites, and distemper are often common among overpopulations. Die-offs due to these diseases are common. It may take weeks for a disease to consume an animal, but these problems can be controlled through trapping to reduce and even stop the spread of disease outbreaks.

Unfortunately, as our human population continues to grow and encroach on farmlands which now have hundreds of houses sitting on them, wildlife is forced to move to different areas or try to stay where they already know, forcing them to adapt to the new environment, which might be in homes or outbuildings, garbage cans, etc. When this occurs, the human population tends to overreact and insist that the wildlife be forever removed from their surroundings regardless of the price both financially or physically, for fear that they will damage property or hurt their children or pets. Little do they realize that the wildlife is just trying to survive.

Sometimes wildlife populations need to be controlled and corrected to defend human activities: bears destroy beehives; coyotes kill livestock and pets; wolves prey greatly on young moose, deer, and caribou, which local people depend upon for food and income; raccoons invade cornfields; deer and elk ruin winter-stored hay; fox, mink, and weasels love domestic poultry; and beavers can flood farmland and roadways. As a victim of poultry decimation, I understand the need for population control after watching late night strolls by three very rotund raccoons on my front porch.

Overall, I feel that the best reason to trap is to benefit wildlife itself. Trapping is used to protect endangered species and encourage their growth and repopulation back into the environment. Rare or endangered species are captured and unharmed in foothold traps or box traps. Then the animals are moved and released a different area, where there are few of that species, in hopes of reestablishing wildlife populations. Ohio recently completed its reintroduction of the river otter into all 88 counties. There has been such great success in many counties that there is now an otter season where three otters per person can be taken.

Even though there are more furbearers in North America today than 100 years ago, trapping is also used to protect the health and management of established or newly established species. These species to be protected

could be plant or animal. In various areas of the United States, pink lady slippers, pitcher plants, whooping cranes, and black-footed ferrets have all had animals removed or relocated after capture in order to reestablish their species in a region. These may be carried out by federal, state or local wildlife managers/biologists, animal control representatives, or private trappers.

Trapping done well allows for animal populations to grow over the course of a year because they are a renewable resource. Obliteration of any species would alter the balance of nature and cause either overpopulation or death of other animal populations. The Wildlife Society states that resource management activities must “maintain essential ecological processes, preserve genetic diversity, and ensure the existence of species and ecosystems.” Therefore, trapping in North America must be versatile, safe, effective, and ecologically sound methods of harvesting and managing furbearers. Trappers understand that their methods occasionally capture unintended animals such as dogs and cats, but they do their best to be mindful to prevent this from happening through seminars, conventions, and become members of trapping associations which establish regulatory and educational programs to reduce the number of both human and animal injuries. New, effective alternative methods of trapping which have the potential to reduce injury but maintain efficiency are being developed. Fur takers also urge the use of devices which dispatch quickly or cause the least amount of stress and injury to a captured animal.

As a trapper, we pace the floor until November 10th. We get a rush as we become one with the Earth and its creatures. Those who do not approve often do not understand the benefits of trapping. They read ill-informed brochures about the brutality of trapping, stating that some animals, especially mothers desperate to get back their young, fight vigorously as they attempt to chew or twist off their trapped limbs. This is untrue since young are born in the spring and are dispersed well before trapping season begins. Others state that if trapped animals do not die from infection or gangrene, they will probably be killed by predators or hunters. Trapped animals will not get an infection or gangrene within 24 hours of capture, and Ohio trappers are required to check their traps within 24 hours.

Many times trappers are several generations in the making. Skills are taught and traps are passed on from one generation to the next and are enjoyed together thereby keeping traditions alive. Many times the income produced from the sale of the pelts is icing on the cake. Often, the income is used to purchase more traps, for others it could be the difference between financial disaster and survival. Most trappers realize that they are helping keep the populations in check and reducing possible disease outbreaks. The general population does not realize or understand that in many parts of the United States, such as Illinois, that nearly the entire animal is used. Trappers sell the fur, and the rest is either eaten or rendered into products that we use everyday. The animals are used to make soap, livestock, feed, paint, tires, textiles, and construction materials.

Trapping benefits all from the smallest flower to the wetlands which filter water and promote flora and fauna diversity. We all must be aware that nature alone cannot provide the upkeep and balance needed when overpopulations run amok.