

A SURVEY OF TRAPPING AND ITS IMPACT ON THE WILD ANIMAL RESOURCE

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Abstract: In spite of the fact that wild animal trapping has been an activity of man since the dawn of civilization it has recently become the subject of heated and emotional controversy. This paper includes a brief history of the role that trapping has played in exploring and settling the wilderness areas of America. In addition, many of the present day problems and philosophies revolving around the capture of fur-bearing animals for profit are discussed. A summary of the Alabama Game and Fish Division's outlook on trapping as a tool of wild animal management and protection is included, with some figures and statistics on furcatchers' license sales and trapping violations since 1919. The main point of view expressed in the paper is that fur-bearing animals are a natural resource that must be used and not wasted. Surplus animal populations have to be harvested in order to maintain a balance in today's delicate ecosystem.

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During the past few years and particularly during the 1976-77 hunting season we in Alabama, as well as others across the United States, have witnessed an apparent upward trend in the capturing of fur-bearing animals for profit. One reason for this apparent increase can be traced to the commercial fur market which paid a premium price for fur during the past season. Last year in the *Readers Digest* an article was published about the bobcat. In this article it was pointed out that bobcat fur would bring up to \$500 on the market. In addition, a great deal of other material has been recently published that has put the spotlight so to speak on wild animal trapping.

Although wild animal trapping has been an activity of man since the dawn of civilization, it has recently become the subject of heated and emotional controversy. To fully understand the role of conservation in regulating the fur-bearing animal resource, it is essential to define the role of trapping.

Native Indians and early European settlers used trapping as a means of survival. Many Indians were master trappers and depended as much upon their ability with pitfalls, snares and deadfall traps as they did upon their bows and arrows for food, clothing and shelter. Effective use of their traps helped protect their limited crops from animals.

The arrival of the first settlers in the early 1600's heralded the beginning of commercial trapping in North America. Before long these early settlers realized the commercial potential of America's fur resource. There was a ready market for all the furs trappers could deliver. To meet this demand, trappers pushed deeper into the wilderness in search of better trapping areas. Behind the trappers came the settlers, pushing the wilderness farther and farther west in their hunger for land.

In the early years the trappers used the techniques of the Indians, chiefly snares and deadfalls which involved tremendous amounts of time and labor and were inefficient, often failing to hold the animal.

Trapping techniques, traps and the people who use them have changed considerably. People from all walks of life are among present day trappers. In 1960-61, the State of Alabama alone reported a fur harvest valued at approximately \$43,000 distributed among 1,270 licensed trappers. As a matter of pointing out the fact that the number of trappers in Alabama has not disproportionately increased since 1919, we see that there were 951 licensed trappers in Alabama in 1919. The 1974-75 season showed 1,287 licensed trappers with 24 of these being non-resident. So the number of trappers has remained relatively constant over the past 13 years in Alabama.

Trapping and hunting have been blamed for the decimation of America's original wildlife populations. It is true that the buffalo was nearly exterminated by market hunters. Unregulated trapping brought the beaver close to extinction in the early 1800's. But both of these events occurred long before wildlife was brought under strict state and federal control.

The major problem today is not overexploitation as is substantiated by the constant number of furcatcher license sales. The problem is the quantity and quality of habitat

available to wild species. The National Wildlife Federation stated that wildlife habitat is being destroyed at the rate of 3,500 acres a day to provide more room for humans. They estimated that approximately 34 million acres of rural land will disappear by the year 2000.

The buffalo has been saved from extinction and approximately 25,000 now occupy habitat in parks, refuges and reservations. Beaver can now be found in all states except Hawaii. In Alabama they have increased to the point that they are considered pests by farmers and foresters. They have in fact reached such numbers that Alabama has no closed season on beaver and any resident or non-resident when trapping for beaver only shall not be required to pay a license fee.

Some of the more publicized endangered species, such as the black-footed ferret, whooping crane, California condor, ivory-billed woodpecker and others, have never been subjected to more than incidental trapping or shooting. Yet all stand on the knife-edge of extinction because each requires a highly specialized type of habitat that is in exceedingly short supply, and is unable to compete with other species for food, cover, water, or other factors within the same ecosystem.

The point that needs to be emphasized is that fur-bearing animals are a natural resource. Unless this natural resource can be put to use and managed properly it will waste.

Left to her own devices, nature will take her own harvest, far more devastating and complete than the most skilled trapper, inflicting more pain, prolonged suffering and misery than the most devout anti-trapper would care to witness. In addition, small game populations function on cycles in nature. An increase in the rat and rabbit population 1 year will automatically lead to an increase in the fox and bobcat predator population in 1 to 2 years due to an increase in food. When the predators increase they cut back on the rabbit and rat population and the food supply diminishes. Then the predators experience not the comparatively swift death of the trapped target animal, but the slow death of weeks from starvation and disease inflicted by nature herself. The only logical alternative to having this needless waste is to harvest the surplus and take advantage of it as the natural resource that it is.

Scientific management ensures that only surplus animals are taken, thus preventing inroads into the breeding population and helping ensure that the survivors are more healthy and efficient breeders. With the exception of situations involving animal damage control, trapping is restricted by law to a few months in fall and winter. Under such regulations, wildlife populations constitute a renewable resource, a resource unlike coal or oil, which, once removed, can never be replaced.

As pointed out earlier, the number of licensed fur catchers in Alabama has not increased drastically since 1919. Simply stated, an increased awareness of the environment has brought trapping of wild animals into controversy. It is the goal and policy of the Alabama Game and Fish Division to uphold trapping, for it is the only way to maintain and manage a small game population. Although there are many sportsmen and others who may oppose trapping at the present time it is hoped that they can be made aware of the fact that trapping is absolutely essential to the conservation and protection of our wild animal resources.

Due to the increased interest in the trapping of wild animals in Alabama, the Game and Fish Law Enforcement Section put a high priority on enforcement of trapping laws and regulations this past 1976-77 season. During the 1974-75 season, less than 50 arrests involving trapping were reported by Alabama Conservation Enforcement Officers. During the 1976-77 season less than 100 were reported statewide.

The most frequent violation occurring seems to be trapping without permission from the landowner. The Alabama Legislature in 1945 passed the permit law. This came 5 years after the hunting permit law which proved to be the best possible way of controlling the wild game surplus. The law itself states that before any person may hunt on any property other than that which he owns, he must first obtain written permission from the landowner. The trapping law is basically the same in that it restricts hunting or trapping any fur-bearing animal on or in any river, creek, branch, lake, pond, or other waters running through or on property not owned, within 10 feet of the bank thereof, without written permission of the landowner.

The permit law is today the best possible solution to the problems involved in protection of Alabama's wild game. But it also is creating another problem. Many landowners in Alabama as well as other states across the nation have been oversold to a certain extent on protection of our wild animals.

Many landowners have not allowed any hunting or trapping on large tracts of game supporting land. Population build ups have occurred on all types of game from rabbits all the way up to deer. The result of these build ups have been severe farm crop damage, diseased animals and eventual die-offs.

The point that needs to be stressed today is that the surplus wild animal population must be harvested. Whether it be by nature or man, one thing is certain . . . it will occur.

The present day goal of all game and fish agencies includes the establishment of refuges and wildlife areas that protect habitat vital to a wide variety of species. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on programs to encourage landowners to maintain and improve habitat suitable for supporting a broad category of wild animal populations, without allowing large surplus build ups. To carry out conservation goals and activities costs money. Currently, the \$242 million paid by hunters, trappers, and fishermen for annual license fees, tags and permits, is the major source of funds for fish and wildlife conservation agencies. In addition, well over \$2.6 billion has been contributed by hunters and trappers for wildlife conservation in the past 50 years.

In conclusion, there is no concern for life among wild birds and animals. They do not live in a "Disney World" harmony as some "experts" would want everyone to believe, but rather all prey species live in constant fear of the predator. There are many areas in wildlife protection and management that are not particularly pleasant and perhaps trapping is one of them. Unfortunately, critics of trapping express more concern over the quality of death rather than the quality of life.

Without a doubt we in Alabama in particular are enjoying the most abundant wild animal population since the time of the native American Indians. The use of emotional advertising against hunting and trapping and the not-so-expert opinions of television celebrities has created a following among those who have had little actual contact and experience with wildlife. This lack of knowledge does not prevent them from espousing a point of view that is dangerously extreme and a definite threat to the well-being of the very animals they are striving to protect.

The time has come for everyone to wake up and recognize trapping and hunting as legitimate uses of our renewable wildlife resources. Any surplus of wildlife that is not harvested by man will be subjected to the cruelest controls.

It really is true, "You can't fool Mother Nature".