

CRUSHING CRUELTY:

ANIMAL TRAPPING IN THE UNITED STATES



BORN FREE USA

SPRING 2021

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INTRODUCTION



"IN THE PRACTICE OF TRAPPING, THERE ARE MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR A WIDE LATITUDE OF NEEDLESS WASTE, OF GREED, OF NEGLECT, AND OF CRUELTY."

**– EUSTACE HAZARD LIVINGSTON,
EDITOR OF THE *TRAPPER'S BIBLE*.³**

In 108 countries around the world, the use of leghold traps has been banned or heavily restricted;¹ the U.S. is not one of those countries. In the U.S., leghold and other traps can still be used by private citizens for recreational and commercial purposes in 48 of the 50 states. In the remaining two,² while trapping has been significantly restricted, taxpayer money continues to fund trapping by government officials and agents in the name of “wildlife management” or “pest control.” In addition to leghold traps, body gripping traps, drowning traps, and snares are widely used as a means of catching and killing animals for their fur, or simply because they are deemed a “nuisance.”

The cruelty of traps cannot be overstated. They cause stress,

injury, and death to millions of animals every year. While all states have some form of regulation for trapping, there is no way to make this archaic and barbaric practice humane, and while it persists, so too will the suffering of animals. If more than 100 countries around the world have succeeded in prohibiting, or at least severely restricting, trapping, there is no excuse for the U.S. – which prides itself on its progressive stance on animal welfare – to allow its continued use.

This report offers a broad overview of trapping and its regulation in the U.S. It identifies core ethical and animal welfare concerns with the practice, and argues that prohibition, and only prohibition, can alleviate these concerns. Accompanying the report is an online database

of state-level regulations and associated State Report Cards, which allow advocates and legislators to understand the current legislative landscape for trapping in their locality and explore recommendations for change. In addition, the report provides links to the wider campaign, outlining steps that private citizens can take to support an end to trapping; whether that be reaching out to state representatives to call for legal change, joining with Born Free USA to achieve bans on trap sales on online and other retail platforms, or helping to raise awareness of, and challenge, trapping on public land. We hope that these resources will support vital work to curb and, ultimately, close the door on this outdated and cruel practice once and for all.

¹ Library of Congress. 2016. Laws on Leg-Hold Animal Traps Around the World. [online] Available at: <<https://www.loc.gov/law/help/leg-hold-traps/leg-hold-traps.pdf>> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

² California and Hawaii

³ Livingston, E., 2012. *The Trapper's Bible*. New York: Constable & Robinson, p. vii.

THE "HERITAGE"

OF TRAPPING IN THE UNITED STATES

Many methods used today to trap and kill animals were first introduced during the early colonization of the U.S. The earliest mechanical traps date back to the 1600s and were imported by European settlers. As these settlers migrated across the country, trapping for food, and then for the burgeoning fur trade, was commonplace. While trappers today romanticize trapping as a sustainable way of interacting with nature, and often refer to trapping as a form of “conservation” in and of itself, the practice initially decimated populations of wild animals.

“By the early 1700s... there wasn’t a beaver to be found in Massachusetts...Before the end of the eighteenth century, it was also gone from Connecticut, and over the next 50 years, it vanished from Vermont, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New Hampshire. Out West... in just a decade and half, Mountain Men had all but annihilated the region’s beavers.” – Frances Backhouse, *Once They Were Hats*.¹

Trappers appeal to a narrative of “tradition” and “heritage” to



justify the fact that trapping has barely changed since the days of early European settlement. It is something of a badge of honor that the same practices, the same methods, and largely the same trap designs have been passed down from generation to generation. But when we consider this from the perspective of the animals subjected to trapping practices that have not changed in over 400 years, this raises serious concerns for welfare.

Four hundred years ago, non-human animals were little understood, and the great thinkers of the day, not least the hugely influential René Descartes and his ilk, promoted the belief that animals were little more than “automata” or, in other words, machines.

Descartes famously stated that a whining dog was akin to a machine that needed oiling. It was believed that animals were mindless and did not feel pain (or at least, did not feel it in the same way that humans did). While individual members of the public might not have been specifically aware of Descartes’ philosophy, the sentiment promoted by him and others was hugely influential and infiltrated public consciousness and attitudes globally.

Another popularly held view at that time – and one that still rears its head today – takes its origin from the religious stance that animals were placed on Earth in order to serve, or otherwise provide for, humans. These positions, coupled with a lack of scientific knowledge

¹ Backhouse, F., 2015. *Once They Were Hats*. 1st ed. Toronto: ECW Press, p.62.

of the complex and profound sentience of other animals, meant our treatment of them lacked any consideration of welfare. Indeed, the concept of animal welfare was only meaningfully developed in the latter part of the 20th century, so the very *idea* of it did not even exist during this period.

Today, an ever-growing body of information and understanding

of animal sentience and welfare can lead us to conclude that practices used to maim and kill animals 400 years ago cannot reasonably be considered humane by today's standards. There is no pride in knowingly subjecting millions of animals each year to extreme suffering in the name of tradition. Trapping is a tradition that, like so many other archaic and cruel

ways in which humans exploit animals, should be consigned to the ashbin of history.



Trappers insist that trapping is humane, but online reviews of the practice lay bare the reality. One trapper, who purchased a snare on Amazon, left the following graphic account of the reality of snares:¹

They work great. I snared a raccoon on my first attempt. The trick is to put some irresistible bait in a spot where there is only one way in, forcing the prey to go through [sic] the snare to get it.

I had some concerns that the snare would not tighten around my prey, and that the lock would not allow release of the animal. The snare tightened around the raccoon. When I came out to see what animal was crying, the raccoon jumped and the snare tightened even more causing the raccoon to [sic] cry out even louder. Apparently he had his front leg or shoulder caught in the snare. So when he jumped over a ledge and the snare tightened further he injured his leg or shoulder and also the snare tightened so much that he had difficulty breathing.

I certainly wasn't going to reach out [to] release the snare around his neck as I would certainly have gotten scratched and bitten by a wild animal backed into the proverbial

corner and fighting for his life. But had it been pet dog or cat or even a rabbit I could have.

This is serious business. Be prepared for what you are going to do with a wild animal caught in the snare, fighting for his life, and suffering and crying. I'm sure not going to reach up and release the lock on the snare holding a wild animal.

Another review on Amazon gave a brief account of coyotes being killed by snares:

I have snares [sic] 3 [co]yotes and all three times it was a neck snare.²

It is unclear what happened to the raccoon in the account, but it is clear from the account that the trapper had no experience or plan as to what to do when faced with the inevitable outcome of laying out a snare or other kind of trap. We can only imagine the suffering that the coyotes endured as they were strangled by the snares. Snares are banned in 12 states but are readily available for sale on sites such as Amazon with no legal disclaimer.

1 Amazon.com. 2020. [online] Available at: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07G4MR5LM/ref=redir_mobile_desktop?_encoding=UTF8&ref_cm_cr_lh_d_bdcrb_top> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

2 *Ibid.*

ANIMAL CRUELTY



Traps are unarguably cruel. The different types of traps include: leghold traps, which capture animals by snapping closed and gripping their legs so that they cannot escape; Conibear (or body gripping) traps, which snap closed on the body and either kill or seriously injure the victim; and snares, which are wires that tighten and lock around a limb, neck, or body of an animal.

While the jagged teeth of the older-style leghold traps have been largely discontinued, traps cause pain, injury, and death wherever they are used. Thirty-five states mandate that

traps must be checked every 24 hours, while the remaining 13 states that allow recreational and commercial trapping allow for traps to be left longer. This means that animals may spend a full 24-hour period or even multiple days injured, stressed, and struggling in a trap – if they are not killed by the trap itself – before the trapper returns to kill them.

Trappers often claim that the leghold traps without teeth do not cause injury to the animals they capture. They further claim that animal rights activists tend to cherry-pick cases in which animals, and

particularly companion animals, have been caught and injured in traps to make trappers look bad. However, the author of *Trapping 101* – a seasoned trapper himself – recounts the multiple times that he has caught family pets in his traps and notes that the traps both injure and scare the animals. In a passage discussing methods of trapping raccoons, he writes, “Honestly, it can be very difficult to release a scared and injured cat or dog from a leghold trap... I have had it happen to me more than once.”¹

He also talks of “inevitably” catching hunting dogs if leghold traps are placed near animal dens, stating that he has witnessed confrontations between trappers and hunters when this happens.²

After an animal has already suffered the trapping itself, if not killed outright, they must endure the killing, which may be carried out by clubbing the animals to death, shooting them, suffocating them by kneeling or standing on them, holding them underwater until they drown, or breaking their necks.

The above-mentioned author tells readers he prefers to kill animals with a firearm but goes on to outline the differing weapons that can be used to club an animal to death: “Many

¹ Massaro, P., 2020. *TRAPPING 101*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, p.93.

² *Ibid.* p. 92



**THE AUTHOR OF TRAPPING 101
– A SEASONED TRAPPER HIMSELF –
RECOUNTS THE MULTIPLE TIMES THAT HE HAS
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objects can be used to crush an animal's skull, such as an axe handle, a heavy dead branch, or any other improvised club.”³

Animals who are able to free themselves from a trap may carry with them injuries that fester and cause infection and that, in turn, can lead to long-term suffering and death.

Drowning traps – euphemistically called “submersion sets” within trapping circles – kill their victims by drowning. This is a terrifying way to die and is confirmed by the U.S. veterinary profession to be inhumane. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) categorically states in its *Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals: 2020 Edition* that “Drowning is not a means of euthanasia and is inhumane.”⁴ As animals in drowning traps are expected to die, check times for these traps

are often longer. In 28 states that allow commercial and recreational trapping, check times for drowning traps are longer than 24 hours. Our past research showed that animals do not always die in these traps and struggle to keep their heads above water. In an incident recorded by our investigators in 2011, a raccoon had fought to survive a drowning trap but, when the trapper returned, he forcibly held the raccoon under the surface until the raccoon drowned.⁵



3 *Ibid.* p. 160


4 Avma.org. 2020. AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals: 2020 Edition. p.112 [online] Available at: <https://www.avma.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/2020_Euthanasia_Final_1-15-20.pdf> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

5 Born Free USA, 2011. Victims of Vanity. [online] Silver Spring: Born Free USA, p.1. Available at: <<https://www.bornfreeusa.org/campaigns/trapping/resources/trapping/victims-of-vanity-ii-2016/>> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

WHY PEOPLE TRAP

People trap for a number of reasons. Millions of animals each year are trapped so that they can be skinned for the fur trade. While the numbers are high, AFWA's 2018 *Characteristics of Trappers* report stated that only 21% of trappers said their trapping has been a very or somewhat important source of income over the past three years. Twenty-three percent of trappers did not even sell their furs.¹ As such, it would appear that fur trapping is largely a hobby pastime, or that trapping is carried out for different purposes.

Other animals are trapped by private citizens or government officials and contractors in the name of "pest control" or the more euphemistic "wildlife management." Most trapping of this type is carried out for two main reasons. First, trapping is carried out to protect livestock – meaning free-living native animals are trapped in order to protect other animals who are being raised to be killed for their meat. Second, predators are trapped to allow for increases of prey animals, often for the



TRAPPING NARRATIVES CENTER THE ENJOYMENT OF THE TRAPPERS AS THE PRIORITY, AND THE ENTERTAINMENT VALUE TOTALLY ERASES THE EXPERIENCES OF ANIMALS KILLED IN PURSUIT OF THAT ENJOYMENT.

purpose of allowing humans to hunt those prey animals.

Finally, trapping has been romanticized for generations as simply an "outdoor pastime" and a way for individuals to spend time in nature, often with family members or friends. The practice in these narratives centers the enjoyment of the trappers as the priority, and the entertainment value totally erases the experiences of animals killed in pursuit of that enjoyment.

An example of how the experience of the animal, and

any inherent value their life may

have, is made irrelevant in the trapping narrative can be found in the following passage in the introduction of the book, *Trapping 101*. In it, the author likens the killing of animals in traps to harvesting vegetables:

*"In spite of what the politically correct faction would indicate, all of our food sources, including vegetables, were alive at one point in time, and in order to become food, that life had to be extinguished. Furbearing animals are a renewable resource, just as deer or evergreen trees are."*²

1 2018. *Characteristics of Trappers*. [online] Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Available at: <https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/4915/2942/8278/Characteristics-of-Trappers-06-18-18_reduced.pdf> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

2 Massaro, P., 2020. *TRAPPING 101*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, p.8.

WHERE PEOPLE TRAP

A photograph of a brown dog, possibly a Weimaraner, walking on a rocky trail. The dog is wearing a harness with two large orange packs on either side. In the background, another dog is visible, and the setting is a wooded area with trees and rocks.

COMPANION ANIMALS
ARE AT RISK WHEN
WALKING THE TRAILS

Put simply, people trap everywhere. Whether that is on their own land as a hobby or as “pest control,” or on public lands.

Shockingly, trapping is permitted and actively practiced within the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). The system of wildlife refuges was established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903 and now encompasses 567 refuges as well as 38 wetlands management districts which, together, comprise 95 million acres of land. Within the system, more than 296 threatened and endangered species are conserved across 356 of the individual refuges.

According to the U.S. Department of the Interior, the National Wildlife Refuge System was established “to conserve America’s wild animals and plants,” and to “provide enjoyment and

beauty”¹ to the millions of people who visit these lands each year. With more than 2,500 miles of land and water trails, these refuges are popular destinations for walkers, many of whom are accompanied by companion animals.

Yet, despite this mission, animal trapping is permitted on 216 (38%) of the refuges, a total of 11.1 million acres of public land. This means that, not only is this cruel practice allowed in areas of public land – funded by taxpayers – but that people and their companion animals are at risk when walking the trails.

Many national and state parks as well as wildlife management areas not only allow trapping but actively promote it as a recreational pastime for visitors. One may find trapping listed in the “Things to Do” section of a state or national park’s website. Trapping is considered to be in derogation of national park values, and thus, the law prohibits trapping in national parks as a matter of course *unless* the practice is authorized in the specific enabling act of the individual parks. Sixty-four of the national parks have moved to explicitly include provisions to allow trapping and hunting within their boundaries despite it being at odds with the values under which the national park system was established.²

In addition to public land, people trap on their own land. This might be an attempt to eradicate predators or animals considered to be “pests” or a “nuisance,” trapping for fur, or even just as a hobby or desired “skill” to develop and practice.

The true extent of trapping across public and private land in the U.S. is impossible to ascertain, but some figures are made publicly available and form the basis of the data analysis used in this report.

- 1 Doi.gov. 2019. Celebrating National Wildlife Refuges. [online] Available at: <<https://www.doi.gov/blog/celebrating-national-wildlife-refuges>> [Accessed 12 February 2021].
- 2 Nationalparkstraveler.org. 2020. Here’s Where You Can Hunt And Trap In The National Park System. [online] Available at: <<https://www.nationalparkstraveler.org/2020/07/heres-where-you-can-hunt-and-trap-national-park-system#:~:text=Hunting%20and%20trapping%20are%20activities,specific%20and%20direct%20congressional%20authorization.>> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

NUMBER OF ACTIVE TRAPPERS



In the conduct of our research, 23 (48%) of the 48 states that issue licenses for trapping provided us with figures pertaining to the number of trapping licenses issued in the last 12 months. This figure totaled 96,113 licenses. Some states, such as Alaska, Maryland, and Colorado, have combined hunt/trap licenses or hunt/trap/fish licenses and do not separate out trapping activities from hunting activities. Colorado did not provide our researchers with information on the number of combined

licenses issued and is therefore not included in these figures.

With the above in mind, in order to calculate a best estimate for the total number of trapping licenses nationwide, we removed the figures for those states that we knew issued combined hunt/trap or hunt/trap/fish licenses so as not to inflate the overall figure. We then calculated the average number of trapping licenses per remaining states for which we had information, then extrapolated that figure to

encompass all 48 relevant states. This gives us an estimated total of 145,868 trapping licenses nationwide.

The number of licenses per state will invariably differ based on the size and topography of the state (and thus, the availability of suitable land for trapping and hunting) and population. While this differential may be represented in the above calculation due to the use of an average number of licenses across states, a second calculation was carried out

that considered the average per capita percentage of trapping licenses issued per state (0.045%), and then extrapolated that to encompass the entire population in the 48 states that allow trapping. This gives us a second estimate of 130,798 trapping licenses.

For the purpose of this report, and based on the calculations above, we believe the total number of licensed private trappers in the U.S. to be between 130,798 and 145,868 at present.



COVID-19 INCREASES INTEREST IN TRAPPING

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues at the time of writing in early 2021, those seeking an optimistic slant on the devastating virus have looked towards the largely positive impact that human society's reduction in travel and pausing of various industries (and associated emissions) – made necessary by lockdowns and other restrictions – might have on the natural environment. Indeed, an article published in the science journal, *Nature*, noted: “Some obvious and immediate effects [of the pandemic] are reflected in the worldwide reports of reduced traffic congestion, clearer skies, cleaner waterways and the emergence of wildlife into human settlements.”¹ Anecdotally, environmentalists have described the current restrictions as giving nature “an opportunity to heal.”

But reports suggest that a new trend emerged as the U.S. moved out of the stricter periods of lockdown but remained in a period when indoor and group recreational activities were still limited. These reports have evidenced the sales of hunting and trapping licenses for the 2020/2021 reaching record highs.

New York State reported record hunting – in particular “big game hunting” – and trapping license sales in the first few days of availability, with sales double those from the same period of the previous year.² Similar trends were reported in Iowa, Virginia, Texas, Michigan, Georgia, and Wisconsin. Gun and ammunition sales also increased significantly in the same period.

With this in mind, it is likely that the numbers of trappers active during the 2020/2021 season will have increased from previous years, taking a significant additional toll on the lives of animals who fall victim to them.

- 1 Diffenbaugh, N., Field, C., Appel, E., Azevedo, I., Baldocchi, D., Burke, M., Burney, J., Ciais, P., Davis, S., Fiore, A., Fletcher, S., Hertel, T., Horton, D., Hsiang, S., Jackson, R., Jin, X., Levi, M., Lobell, D., McKinley, G., Moore, F., Montgomery, A., Nadeau, K., Pataki, D., Randerson, J., Reichstein, M., Schnell, J., Seneviratne, S., Singh, D., Steiner, A. and Wong-Parodi, G., 2020. The COVID-19 lockdowns: a window into the Earth System. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 1(9), pp.470-481.
- 2 Dec.ny.gov. 2020. DEC Reports Record Sales for Big Game Hunting and Trapping Licenses, Nearly Triple 2019 Opening Day Sales - NYS Dept. of Environmental Conservation. [online] Available at: <<https://www.dec.ny.gov/press/121334.html>> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

HOW TRAPPING IS REGULATED

Of all 50 states, only California and Hawaii have significant restrictions on trapping. In California, commercial and recreational trapping is prohibited, and in Hawaii, trapping is only permitted by a government agent. Despite this, trapping by government agents as a form of “wildlife management” is not insignificant in these states. For California, available information suggests that 660 trapping licenses were issued during the 2019/2020 trapping season. This would encompass trapping carried out under the mantle of wildlife management/pest control but would not include state authorities carrying out trapping. In Hawaii, eight companies are listed as “government contractors” for the purpose of hunting and trapping¹ on the Hawaii BIDS website, a website which lists government contracts open for tender and current government contractors. No data is available on the extent to which trapping is carried out by these contractors, nor do we know if this is an exhaustive list.

All other states allow trapping by private citizens for recreational and commercial purposes and

have some form of licensing regime in place with regard to trapping. However, not all trapping activities require a license. For example, in Alabama, trapping of furbearing animals for commercial purposes requires a license, but other kinds of trapping, such as recreational trapping, do not. Whether or not a license is required when trapping on private land differs from state to state and is contingent on the species of animal being trapped.

Only six states have issued bans on leghold traps, five states have banned conibear (body gripping) traps, and 12 states have prohibited snares.

Bear trapping has been banned in all states with the exception of Maine, which still permits it on the proviso that only snares or live traps are used. Trapping of bobcats is banned in nine states and otters are protected from trapping in eight states.

Only two states limit the number of traps that are permitted for use, but various states issue “bag limits” on the number of animals who can be killed.

A detailed matrix of state trapping regulations is available at bornfreeusa.org/crushingcruelty



¹ Hawaiiids.us. n.d. Government Contractors in Hunting and Trapping. [online] Available at: <<https://www.hawaiiids.us/hawaii-contractors/naics-114210-Hunting-Trapping.htm>> [Accessed 12 February 2021].



THE ANIMAL VICTIMS

MAGGIE'S STORY

In early 2020, Maggie, a Great Pyrenees puppy, had the misfortune of being caught in a leghold trap in Tennessee.

She was only 12 weeks old when she found a way out of her outdoor pen and wandered off her family's property, which was next to a wooded area where people often set traps for coyotes. Maggie was gone for two days before returning home with severe injuries to her paw and leg. Maggie's injuries consisted of multiple fractures: all of her metacarpals in the paw were fractured and her carpus was also severely damaged. There was also significant soft tissue damage done to her paw and leg. Due to the severity of Maggie's injuries, and the probability of not regaining use of the leg, the veterinarian determined that it would be necessary to amputate the injured leg.

Maggie's treatment was partially funded by the Born Free USA Trapping Victims' Fund, which helps pay medical bills for animal victims of trapping. Maggie was cared for by the National Great Pyrenees Rescue before being adopted by a loving family.

Thankfully, Maggie has thrived under the love and care of her new family and, now renamed "Bunny," she gets around just fine on her three legs. She is one of the lucky ones.



Photo: Maggie after surgery, National Great Pyrenees Rescue

The range of species targeted is extensive. Beaver, bobcat, coyote, fisher, fox, marten, mink, muskrat, opossum, otter, raccoon, skunk, and weasel are commonly targeted animals. As gray wolves were delisted from federal protection under the Endangered Species Act, they are now increasingly targeted in hunting and trapping in a growing number of states. Only two states control the number of traps each trapper is permitted to set.

In addition to animals deliberately targeted, there are countless unintended victims of traps. Born Free USA maintains a database of unintended trapping victims based on news reports and direct reporting by concerned citizens. One such victim was Maggie the puppy, who is lucky to be alive today.

Between 2010 and 2020, Born Free USA documented 267 unintended victims of traps. This is most certainly only the tip of the iceberg in terms of true numbers. Just five of the 48 states that allow recreational and commercial trapping demand that trappers submit reports to document the number of unintended trapping victims caught in their traps.

NUMBER OF ANIMALS KILLED



According to the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA), the total number of furbearing animals “harvested” in 2018 (the last year for which data was available) was 2,778,955.¹ This will be a minimum number of animals actually killed by trapping in the U.S. during that year, as it does not account for deaths caused by trapping for purposes other than for fur harvest. Only 13 states demand that trappers file a report to document the numbers of lives taken and, as noted above, just five states require information on unintended victims. As such, it is impossible to assess the true scale of the practice across the U.S. What is clear, though, is that many millions of animals – both intended and unintended targets – are cruelly injured and killed each year in traps.



**MANY MILLIONS OF ANIMALS
– BOTH INTENDED AND
UNINTENDED TARGETS – ARE CRUELLY
INJURED AND KILLED EACH YEAR IN TRAPS.**

¹ www.fishwildlife.org. n.d. Furbearer Management. [online] Available at: <<https://www.fishwildlife.org/afwa-inspires/furbearer-management>> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

TRAPPER EDUCATION



Twenty-two states make no demand that would-be trappers complete any kind of education prior to obtaining a license. Twenty-six states demand that a trapper education course must be completed prior to a license being issued, or retrospectively for multi-year licenses issued before the education prerequisite applied.

The content of trapper education courses does not just focus on best practice and

trapping methods, but is part of a wider public relations exercise to uphold the archaic pastime.

The very first paragraph of the New York state trapper education manual reads:

“Trapping is enjoyable and it provides a variety of benefits to those with the knowledge and ability to do it well. But, if trapping is not done right, it can cause bad feelings towards trappers and trapping. Therefore, trapping is a serious business. The future of

trapping depends on the way you as a trapper perform.”¹

Worryingly, it appears that a fundamental reason for the courses is to protect the image and future of trapping against those who would criticize it. Trapping, we are told, is not a “serious business” because it takes the lives of millions of innocent animals each year, but because, if not done right, it can cause bad feelings towards trappers and damage public perception of trapping.

¹ New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, 2005. Trapping Furbearers - An Introduction to Responsible Trapping. [online] New York: New York DEC, p.1. Available at: <https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/trapedman.pdf> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

The manual continues to paint a sanitized and romanticized history of trapping in the U.S., skipping directly from mention of the beaver fur trade helping to support the establishment of European settlers to this incredible statement: “Thanks to sound wildlife management, large populations of furbearers still exist.”² The manual thereby suggests a centuries-long, unbroken chain of responsible management of an ever-abundant population of furbearing animals. In fact, the U.S. fur trade devastated beaver populations, all but driving the species to extinction. It is certainly not thanks to, but rather, in spite of, trapping that furbearers are plentiful today.

Of great concern is the statement in the New York Trapper Education Manual:

“When trapping in the water for semi-aquatic species, all traps should be placed in a manner that will submerge the captured animal. This causes a quick and humane death.”

As already established, the AVMA has categorically confirmed that “drowning is not a means of euthanasia and is inhumane.”³



Other state manuals perpetuate the falsehood that drowning is a humane form of killing. Many take the wording for their manuals directly from that of the nationwide Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies manual which states, under the heading: Describe two ways to safely, quickly, and humanely dispatch a furbearing animal: “Inexperienced trappers should focus on making selective water sets using submersion techniques...”⁴

When government-published trapping education courses are encouraging practices that have been firmly categorized as inhumane by the U.S. veterinary profession, and what is more, are falsely promoting those practices as “humane,” the veracity of any other claims relating to animal welfare made as part of these courses simply cannot be taken seriously.

² Ibid. p. 3

³ Avma.org. 2020. AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals: 2020 Edition. [online] Available at: <https://www.avma.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/2020_Euthanasia_Final_1-15-20.pdf> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

⁴ Fishwildlife.org. 2005. *Trapper Education Manual*. p. 98 [online] Available at: <https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/7915/1977/4541/Student_manual_2005.pdf> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

PURCHASING A TRAP

Traps can be purchased from a number of retailers such as hunting supply stores, farm supply stores, and multiple online outlets including popular shopping sites, Amazon and eBay. Rarely do sites advertising traps for sale make any mention of the legalities of trapping, although a very small number advise buyers to check their local regulations on the practice before using a purchased trap. The wide availability of traps for sale online means that there appears to be no meaningful restriction on anyone purchasing a trap. Traps are even available for sale for use in illegal trapping activities – such as bear trapping.

Online reviews of trap sales demonstrate that at least some trappers buy their first trap without any experience and look to online video tutorials as a means of instruction. A very small number of trap sellers advise customers to check the legality of trapping in their local area as part of the sales information.

One would-be trapper admitted that they did not know how to trap and asked advice on Amazon as to

ILLEGAL BEAR TRAPPING

In Maine, the only state that allows bear trapping, trapping is permitted by leg snare or live trap only. As such, it is illegal in all states to trap bears in leghold traps. Notwithstanding this, bear traps are available to buy online at the click of a button. Websites such as Sportsman's Guide¹ and Amazon² have bear traps for sale. The specialist hunting sites generally list the traps in the Hunting Equipment section of their sites, alongside every other type of trap, then include a line in the small print that states that they recommend the traps for decorative purposes only. In the question-and-answer section of one of these sites, the site owner confirmed that the traps are however "fully functional." These sites often have no other "decorative items" for sale, and to list such an item if it were truly for "decorative" purposes, it makes little sense to list it deep among the other hunting equipment. Indeed, if these traps were truly "decorative" they could be welded open or shut to guarantee that they are not used for illegal activity. It seems clear that companies market and sell these traps knowing the purpose for which they will be used and, indeed, intending for them to be used in this way.

- 1 See: <https://www.sportsmansguide.com/product/index/grizzly-bear-16-trap?a=132229>
- 2 Amazon.com. n.d. [online] Available at: <https://www.amazon.com/Ursus-1-Ouell-Efficiency-Performance-Environmental/dp/B077NL46WH/ref=sr_1_26?dchild=1&keywords=bear+trap&qid=1612448562&sr=8-26> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

how to use the snares that they were planning to buy.

Q: Never done this before. Are there any instructions that come with the snares? If not, where on the internet can I find some?

A: I don't remember seeing any instructions...There are several instructional videos on YouTube that are very good...

There is no mention on Amazon that snares are banned in 12 states, nor the need to consult local regulations or participate in trapper education.

Other customers spoke of their surprise at the suffering the traps they had purchased caused the animals. One trapper, who bought a Duke brand body gripping trap on Amazon in order to trap ground squirrels, left the following disturbing account in a review:

"Thought these would trap and kill ground squirrels immediately. For one was pinched in the middle but still alive. May have been that way for hours. These will be going in the trash."

HOW TRAPPING REGULATIONS ARE ENFORCED

As highlighted above, while most states have some sort of regulation of trapping activities, these regulations do not necessarily join up with the availability of traps for sale and use. It is impossible to say whether the online accounts of trap use were examples of legal or illegal trapping. What does seem clear, is that while trapper education is increasingly encouraged, or even mandated at state level, individuals are buying and using traps with no prior experience.

Our researchers contacted the relevant state departments to better understand how trapping laws were enforced and what enforcement action had been taken to uphold trapping regulations in the 2019/2020 trapping season. Only 30 of the 50 states responded to our request and two of those (Minnesota and Virginia) refused to provide information.

Twenty-one states provided us with information on how many employees were tasked with monitoring and enforcement of trapping regulations. In most states, the answers provided gave the total number of game wardens or other such employees who, as part of their

work, take responsibility for trapping. The average number of employees with some responsibility for trapping was 164 per state. Extrapolated to all 50 states, this would give us an estimate of around 8,219 individual employees to monitor trapping across the country. Some states, however, have remarkably few employees to monitor trapping with Arkansas,

THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES WITH SOME RESPONSIBILITY FOR TRAPPING WAS 164 PER STATE. EXTRAPOLATED TO ALL 50 STATES, THIS WOULD GIVE US AN ESTIMATE OF AROUND 8,219 INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYEES TO MONITOR TRAPPING ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

for example, issuing 48,687 Resident Trapper Permits in the 2019/2020 season and employing just one person who spends just 10-20% of their time on “furbearer related issues.”

Ten states told us that they did not track complaints or concerns with regard to illegal trapping logged with them. Four of these states did, however, track relevant violations. Of the 10 states that did provide the number of complaints received during the

2019/2020 season, these totaled 476. Nine states provided information on the number of violations, which were as follows: 36 prosecutions/court summons, 160 citations, 68 warnings, and 12 revocations.

Fewer than half of the states were willing or able to provide us with any enforcement data with regard to trapping in their jurisdictions, and fewer than one-fifth were willing or able to provide tangible enforcement action that had been carried out in relation to trapping. As such, while there does appear to be a workforce across the country tasked with enforcing trapping regulations, the efficacy of such enforcement is difficult to ascertain due to a lack of available data. Whether or not this is because the data does not exist or simply that the states do not make it available to the public is unknown. If the former, this implies that significant work may be required to ensure that existing laws are properly enforced, and if the latter, there is a strong case for more transparency over this controversial issue.

THE FUTURE OF TRAPPING: STEPS TOWARDS PROHIBITION



**TRAPPER EDUCATION AND
LICENSING DEMANDS ARE
EASILY BYPASSED ACROSS
THE COUNTRY.**

This report has explored some of the core concerns surrounding trapping in the U.S. While most states have some form of regulation of trapping activities, there is little publicly available information regarding the ways in which those regulations are enforced, which is problematic. The widespread availability of traps for sale online and in other outlets, coupled with the open admission from customers who have purchased and used those traps that they have no experience in using them, suggests that trapper education and licensing demands are easily bypassed across the country. The availability of traps for banned activities in online stores, such as leghold traps for bears, is deeply concerning.

Trapper education courses provide dubious information that may seek to sanitize, romanticize, and promote trapping along with providing information that is both inaccurate and misleading (such as claims that drowning an animal is “humane”).

Only two states, to date, have banned commercial and recreational trapping, but even those states continue to allow trapping to be carried out for other purposes or at the behest of the state.

Notwithstanding the above, trapping is a cruel, archaic, and outdated practice that causes immense suffering and death to millions of animals in the U.S. each year. Statements included in this report from trappers themselves confirm that traps cause injury and stress to animals, and other accounts of animal suffering and death have been shared in publicly available product reviews on sites such as retail giant Amazon. If this is the information people are comfortable sharing with strangers in print or online, we dread to think of the incidents that go on behind closed doors.

The indiscriminate nature of traps means that it is not just the intended victims who suffer in their millions, but also companion animals and other animals who happen across

these barbaric contraptions. Quotes from trappers included in this report confirm that family pets are caught, and we know from our own work of multiple family pets and other animals who have been maimed or killed by traps.

There is no way to regulate this practice to make it humane, and it is high time that trapping is consigned to the ashbin of history. Despite the pride in the U.S. of its progressive and science-based animal welfare and environmental legislation, it lags behind more than 100

countries that have banned or severely restricted trapping within their jurisdictions.

Born Free USA is working to end trapping in the U.S. by virtue of a number of different avenues:

- With federal policymakers to implement legislation such as the Refuge from Cruel Trapping Act, which would prohibit trapping within the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- With state policymakers to implement statewide bans on both public and private land.
- With members of the public to raise awareness surrounding the realities and extent of trapping across the country and by empowering them to take action to make change in their localities.
- With retailers to prohibit and restrict the sale of traps, particularly online, with a focus on major retailers such as Amazon and eBay.
- With animal rescue and rehabilitation organizations that care for victims of trapping via our Trapping Victims' Fund, which provides financial relief for veterinary bills for victims.
- With other grassroots, national, and international organizations in coalition towards change.

You can support this important campaign, which seeks to save the lives of millions of animals across the U.S. every year, by visiting bornfreeusa.org/crushingcruelty and taking action today for an end to cruel trapping.



DESPITE THE PRIDE IN THE U.S. OF ITS PROGRESSIVE AND SCIENCE-BASED ANIMAL WELFARE AND ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION, IT LAGS BEHIND MORE THAN 100 COUNTRIES THAT HAVE BANNED OR SEVERELY RESTRICTED TRAPPING WITHIN THEIR JURISDICTIONS.



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