

# A Wildlife Biologist's View of Trapping

by Joe Clark



**E**arly North American explorers returned to Europe telling of the tremendous wealth of natural resources they found in the New World. Even today, the strength of the United States among world powers is largely due to our abundant natural resources.

America's greatest natural resource from the 1600s through the 1800s was not considered to be gold, oil, timber or coal, but fur. Buckskin-clad explorers pressed ever westward in search of fur, particularly beaver, thereby opening the frontier to early settlers. Beaver pelts commanded a high price in Europe where they were made into fashionable beaver felt hats. Arkansas Post, the first Arkansas settlement, was established in 1686 as a river port for buying and selling fur.

Beaver were taken by a variety of methods such as snares, deadfalls and with primitive rifles. In 1823, however, Sewell Newhouse of Oneida, New York, began manufacturing a new device that would both revolutionize, and later, draw heavy criticism to the fur industry. This new device was the steel leghold trap.

Today, some organizations actively oppose using the steel leghold trap, claiming the device is cruel, unnecessary and barbaric. Unfortunately, many of these groups are composed of misguided and terribly misinformed people. These groups are often strongest in urban areas, perhaps because city dwellers are not exposed to the realities of everyday life and death as much as people from rural backgrounds. Undoubtedly, many trapping opponents never think twice about the origins of beef when they sit down to eat a hamburger.

Protectionist groups rely on emotional appeals rather than reason or logic. As a wildlife biologist responsible for managing Arkansas' furbearing animals,

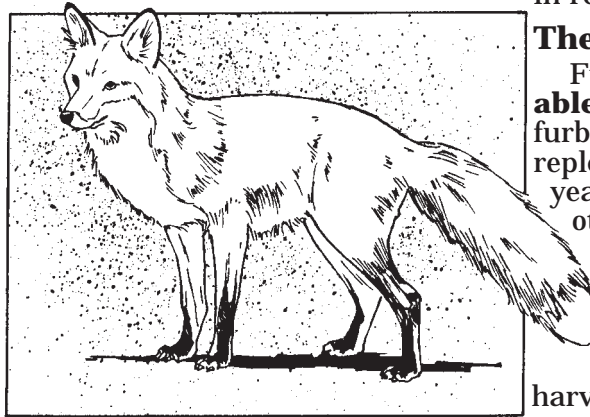
I must be objective and think in terms of the "big picture." The general public often thinks of wildlife in terms of **individual** animals rather than as a **population** of animals, and there's quite a distinction. Trapping, for example, is bad for an individual muskrat if it's the one that gets caught. However, trapping is very healthy for the muskrat population on a particular marsh by preventing habitat destruction and disease as a result of overpopulation.

The leghold trap controversy has three main issues: one of biology, one of economics and one of morality. I'm more familiar with the biological and economical ramifications of trapping, because they can be quantified. Morality, on the other hand, is not quantifiable and is, therefore, difficult to discuss. In this article I'll discuss the biological and economic aspects of trapping and present my own views regarding the moral question. The biological and economical ramifications are clear cut; however, readers must make their own moral decisions.

## The Biological Issue

No wildlife species can be stockpiled indefinitely. Wildlife populations fluctuate annually, and a certain number die because of the limited ability of habitat to support these animals (otherwise known as carrying capacity). In most cases trapping compensates for natural causes of death such as disease, starvation or predation.

For some species, trapping dampens population fluctuations, resulting in higher densities than could be achieved without trapping.



Muskrats, for example, have tremendous reproductive capabilities (80% of the population can be trapped each year without detriment) and, without trapping, can become so numerous that they devastate the habitat and cause a population crash. This is a common problem in Louisiana's coastal marshes when an adequate harvest is not achieved. As a result of these so-called "eat-outs," the habitat takes years to recover and again produce high numbers of muskrats.

In certain cases, but not always, trapping helps reduce disease outbreaks in wildlife. Disease works as a natural regulatory mechanism when wildlife populations reach excessive numbers by causing population crashes. Today, however, because of habitat changes and the absence of large predators, "nature's way" is often drastic. Trapping helps prevent the "booms and busts" of furbearer populations. Many diseases carried by furbearers (such as rabies, tularemia and distemper) are transmissible to man and his pets. Because most disease outbreaks are density dependent, trapping is a logical and desirable tool for regulating these diseases.

Trapping is not a "cure all" for wildlife disease problems. Harvest pressure is heavily dependent on fur prices, and consequently, low value species may be underharvested. The point is, however, that in many cases trapping probably does have an effect in reducing wildlife diseases.

## The Economic Issue

Fur is called a **renewable resource** because furbearer populations replenish themselves each year. Synthetic furs, on the other hand, are made from dwindling petroleum products, which are not renewable.

The value of North America's wild fur pelt harvest has been estimated

\$500 million annually while ranched pelts are valued at \$100 million annually. Retail sales of furbearer garments in the U.S. in 1980 was \$944 million.

The value of raw fur pelts sold in Arkansas during the 1984-85 season was \$2.2 million. Depending on the accuracy of fur harvest reports, this value could actually be double that figure. Although few Arkansans trap as their sole means of support, trapping serves as an important source of supplemental income for many.

Regardless of the claims of protectionist groups, the steel leghold trap is a selective tool for reducing wildlife damage. It's been estimated that livestock losses due to coyote depredation in 16 western states during 1978 cost producers \$25.4 million. Even though widespread reductions in western coyote populations were brought about by use of sodium monofluoroacetate (1080), sheep losses from coyotes actually increased. More effective control programs are aimed at offending **individuals** rather than populations. The steel leghold trap is highly selective in controlling these individual offenders.

The total economic value of the North American fur resource cannot be fully appreciated without considering the damage that trapping prevents annually, the wild furbearer harvest, revenues derived through state and local taxes and licenses, and the many businesses associated with the fur pelt, garment and fashion industries.

## The Moral Issue

Value judgements are dependent on factors such as religious beliefs, upbringing

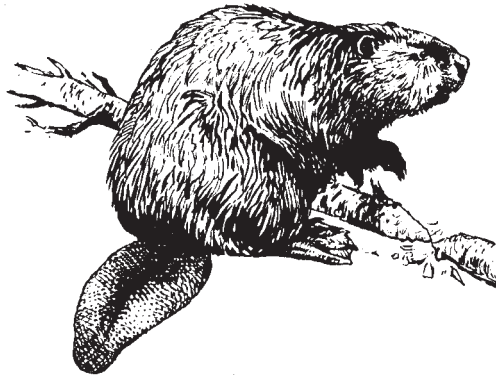
and personal experiences. Since it takes many years to mold one's character, these value judgements are not easily changed. Rather than enter into a lengthy description of my own moral convictions, I will briefly present a couple of points relevant to trapping and hope the reader will reach a decision on trapping based on **all three** basic issues: biology, economics and morality. First of all, whether we like it or not, we're all consumers. The fact is man can't exist on this planet without destroying and consuming other animals.

Secondly, Mother Nature is often violent and cruel. It is very rare for any wild animal to die of old age. As one of my college professors used to say, "Wild animals die with their boots on." For example, death from sarcoptic mange, a common killer of coyotes, can take many months. The mange mites reach the hair follicles around the eyes, causing the eyes to swell shut, making the coyote incapable of catching prey. A slow death ensues. Compared to this, death at the hands of a trapper seems almost merciful.

## The Future

Trapping technology has improved a great deal in the last few years. Although no definition of "humane" exists that will satisfy everyone, trap manufacturers have been working on the development of more humane trapping techniques. Traps with teeth have not been manufactured for many years, and a new trap with rubber jaws is now on the market and appears to hold much promise.

Furtakers are very concerned about the image they present to the public. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission is also concerned. Hopefully in the future,



*Why do people brave harsh winter weather to work their trappings?*

*For some, it is a chance to be outdoors and observe nature firsthand.*

*For others, the extra income is important, to the extent of financing an education or even buying necessities.*

funds will become available to provide a mandatory Furtaker Education Course for first-time trappers to acquaint them with proper trapping techniques, ethics and responsibilities.

The anti-trapping movement poses a very real threat to agricultural interests, the fur industry, public health and wildlife management. Many professional organizations including the U.S. Animal Health Association, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Wildlife

Society, the Wildlife Disease Association, the Wildlife Management Institute and the National Wildlife Federation support trapping. The leghold traps is an indispensable wildlife management tool, and its use in Arkansas and elsewhere should be adamantly supported.



**Arkansas Game & Fish Commission**

2 Natural Resources Drive  
Little Rock, Arkansas 72205

*(April 1998)*