

Geoforum

An opportunity for our members to present their views on controversial topics.

In defence of trapping

IN THE Feb/March issue of *Canadian Geographic*, Bruce G. Cumming (biology professor, University of NB) claimed that trapping is maintained because of economic considerations, including "fuzzy ideas about game management". He also branded leghold traps as barbaric.

The following intends to show that fur-trapping is not cruel and that the contribution of trappers to humaneness and conservation is greatly underestimated.

Fur-trapping is permitted because of wildlife management concerns. These are neither fuzzy nor because of economic considerations, but are governed by biological facts.

Furbearers annually produce a surplus of young. Their survival depends directly upon the availability of adequate habitats. When their populations reach levels which can no longer be supported by their habitats, massive deaths follow.

For example, muskrat produce on average 12 young every year. When they become too numerous in a marsh area, extensive vegetation stands are destroyed by their house building and feeding activities. Some muskrat die of starvation, a long and painful death. Others fight among themselves and bear wounds which soon become infected. Crowded and wounded muskrat are susceptible to infectious diseases and an entire population can soon be annihilated.

Overcrowding, habitat destruction and disease outbreaks have also destroyed beaver and fox populations.

On the other hand, fur-trapping permits harvesting the surplus furbearers which in turn:

- reduces the competition for food and cover;
- increases the survival rate during harsh winters;
- maintains healthy and productive wildlife populations;
- protects valuable habitats from destruction and deterioration.

Most of the arguments put forward by anti-trapping groups refer to trap devices. These groups should know that all provincial and territorial trappers' associations have education programs. These are conservation oriented and designed to teach the most humane trapping techniques and at the same time to develop better ways to capture furbearers. Trapper organizations have a code of conduct in which they insist on use of proper traps and sets, daily inspection of the sets, use of killing traps in areas not frequented by cats and dogs, and co-operation with wildlife management programs.

The leghold trap has been recognized as an effective practical means for capturing certain species by the Wildlife Society in the U.S. When set properly, a leghold trap drowns a muskrat or a mink within three minutes. By contrast natural deaths from overcrowding and starvation, wounds or diseases take longer, are more painful and, consequently, more inhumane than the leghold trap.

Undoubtedly, work must continue to develop more humane trapping systems. However, habitat loss or deterioration is the most important threat to furbearer populations.

Gilbert Proulx

Dr. Proulx is a consulting wildlife biologist in Guelph, Ont.