



Wild Lands Advocate 11(2): 25 - 26, April 2003

Two Letters to the Editor re Trapping

## A TRAPPER RESPONDS

I would like to take a moment to respond to Jonathan Wright's letter pertaining to "an essay on fur trapping." I do not have a problem with Mr. W/riht expressing his opinion; this is, after all, what makes us free. I have an opinion also and would ask that readers keep their minds open to all sides of an issue.

Mr. Wright takes exception that the modern fur trade is equated with native tradition. Natives bartered among themselves long before European settlement. Once trappers developed a commercial market, many natives became fur traders. Today, fur harvesting is an important part of native culture and livelihood. In addition, the byproducts of the harvest (meat) are still used in many communities.

Mr. Wright is concerned with the removal of 150 to 200 high order carnivores (lynx) from a trapping area, a quote he attributed to a trapper. Your readers should be informed that the lynx harvest is managed on a quota basis per trapping area. In addition, before a lynx pelt is sold, each pelt must be registered. This information provides provincial biologists with the information necessary to set trapping area quotas the following year. Their numbers mirror the hare cycle and they cannot be stockpiled. When the hare population crashes, so do the lynx. Death comes by way of starvation, disease and cannibalism.

To have a quota of 200 lynx, the individual trapper would have to be trapping an area of about 33 townships, which is over 1,000 sq. miles, and such large traplines are not granted to one individual. In Alberta there are about 150,000 sq. miles of registered trapline area and last year 1,667 lynx were taken. The point is that lynx numbers are managed based on sound wildlife principles, and numbers are allotted to trappers by the provincial government.

Wolverine is also a concern to Mr. Wright. He speaks of a black market for these animals. I personally am not aware of this, but I have been around long enough not to dismiss it out of hand. If it is the case, it becomes an enforcement issue. The legal trapping of wolverine is also based on a quota and registration system. This number of animals is derived from the information gleaned from the registrations. It is interesting to note that last year 19 wolverine were taken by trappers with a value of approximately \$5,000. The total value of all furs in the province was over two million dollars. The wolverine collection is a small but still important aspect of our fur harvest.

Humane capture devices were an issue. Traps are tested and approval is required before they are used. By 2007, all traps in use will be required to meet an international trap standard. This standard was set and agreed to after considerable consultation with many countries that import Canada's fur.

Mr. Wright is correct when he states that these devices may capture animals, other than the intended target. This is where our trapper education program comes in. With many trap sets the approach and kill zone can be directed and will eliminate most accidental catches. This area is constantly evolving and trappers are working hard to ensure their catches are humane and catch the intended species.

He is correct when he states that no one but the trapper usually views the catch. Trappers have respect and do not want to take animals that are not intended. I would quit hunting, fishing and trapping in a moment if I felt that I was not respectful of the furbearers, and most trappers feel this way. If Mr. Wright and others truly want to help, they might consider donating some funds to the Fur Institute of Canada to help with trap development.





I am certain that trappers are true conservationists. We are not preservationists and believe in the wise use of a renewable resource. We do get a little possessive of our traplines but realize we do not “own the land.” Because we are so close to nature and witness habitat degradation and abuse, we sometimes come across this way. Be patient with us; we are working on this attitude.

The Alberta Wilderness Association and the Alberta Trappers Association have more in common that you might think. We are both stakeholders and want to see a healthy, viable ecosystem for all time. By working together and respecting each other’s legal right to travel the land and enjoy nature’s bounty, whether it is berry picking, fur trapping or just feeling alive, we will both be able to pass on our values to future generations.

- Jim Mitchell  
Trapper Education  
Alberta Trapper Association

## AN EX-TRAPPER RESPONDS TO A TRAPPER’S RESPONSE

Jim, the diplomatic tone of your letter truly impressed me. Bravo! A practice as distasteful as fur trapping needs diplomatic spokesmen.

I do not take exception to the fur trade being “equated” with native tradition. What I take exception to, and I think this was made clear in my essay, is the suggestion that the mass-killing of furbearers on modern traplines for maximum profit is the same tradition as the natives practiced before Europeans came along to exploit the situation – the indigenous wildlife and peoples both. Yes, fur harvesting today is an important part of the culture of *some* native bands, although the numbers of active native trappers are dropping as they opt for more lucrative work from amongst the largely distasteful choices we have forced upon them. Even the ones who do trap are participating more in our system than in theirs. To placate the public by saying, “Hey folks, we’re only doing what the first nations did” is twisted.

Jim, I suggest you refer to National Energy Board Hearing Order GH-1-01, Volume 4, line 930. Here you will find an Alberta trapper’s statement suggesting a catch of 150 to 200 lynx being the norm on his trapline in a good year. You will see that this is not something I fabricated to make a point. In contesting this, on the other hand, you are pointing out that your fellow trapper is either a) providing misleading information to the international community while in a formal public hearing situation, or b) in gross contravention of regulations. Neither situation is very flattering of trappers.

I have no doubt that trapping wolverine is important to trappers. My point is – and trappers should know this as well as anyone without waiting for some official to dictate to them – that killing a species that is already of provincial concern because it is so sparse on the landscape is inexcusable. The fact that you are still allowed to do so is all the proof required that trapping is *not* regulated by “sound wildlife principles,” as you go on to suggest.

In fact, in this regard trapping is no different from the mass market-killing of any wildlife in this country, whether the killers are trappers or hunters or commercial fisherman. Sound wildlife principles take a distant backseat to politics. If enough people like yourself exert enough pressure on the “right” politician, chances are good you will be allowed to kill what you like, as long as it makes money. That’s why I bother to write stuff like this when I’d rather be doing something less distasteful – in the hopes that some day we will *truly* be basing our conduct on sound wildlife principles! Not to mention getting in touch with our moral obligations to other living creatures, something our culture is a near-complete failure at.





I'd further like to point out that trapping primarily provides biologists with information not on what is out there in the bush, but rather on what *was* out there in the bush.

May I re-emphasize a very important point you seem to have overlooked. *I was a fur trapper*. I am intimately familiar with what trapping is about. I was out there as a fur-trapper "enjoying nature's bounty" – by killing it off and causing who knows what magnitude of suffering in the process. By eroding the very bounty I professed to be a lover of.

And while on the subject of the bounty of nature, I would like to point out that every time a trapper unnecessarily kills a wolverine, or a fisher or an otter, etc. (keeping in mind that *all* fur-trapping today is inherently unnecessary), I feel that you have personally ripped me, and every other world citizen who enjoys nature, off. Because by pursuing *your* model of enjoying nature's bounty, you rob all the rest of us of a percentage of our potential to do the same. You get to enjoy your however-many fisher you've killed, and the \$40 or so each of their deaths is worth to you. But those fisher are now dead. None of the rest of us will ever have the opportunity to enjoy them, or simply to enjoy knowing they are still out there, as I do. If you aren't thinking about issues like this, you should be. Thinking about how what you are doing is not only utterly unnecessary, it is a form of thievery – on a number of levels. You are, furthermore, robbing other living creatures of *their* potential to enjoy ... anything! *For what?* For absolutely nothing of any noteworthy relevance.

Trapping is an extraordinarily selfish pursuit. It is *not* about conservation, it is *not* about fair-chase – nature does these things very nicely without us. It is about capitalism-without-ethics. There is a name for capitalism without ethics, and the capitalists can tell you what that name is: greed. Greed is why most traplines are deserted as soon as fur prices fall. And yes, I *do* want to help. Not out of ignorance, but from my basis of profound knowledge, as an ex-trapper. I want very much to play my part in seeing that we evolve as a people to the point where fur trapping – in the same tradition as slavery and child-labour – is abolished.

Perhaps you *should* take up berry picking. Or photography... or nature education... or meat-hunting with a longbow... wildlife filmmaking... catch-and-release fishing... or conservation biology... environmental advocacy... or eco-tourism...

- Jonathan Wright

