



# Where Do You Stand On

# Trapping



## ▲ Overview

Presented with a series of statements, students take a stand along a continuum, then discuss their opinions and values about a controversial issue: trapping.

## ▲ Concepts

- ▲ Trapping is a controversial topic, causing diverse reactions among people.
- ▲ Trapping is both a part of our past heritage and a modern-day tool for wildlife management.
- ▲ There are a variety of factors that influence our values and affect our behaviors.

## ▲ Objectives

Students will be able to:

- ▲ Recognize one way trapping has been significant in American history.
- ▲ Explain some ways in which trapping is part of modern day life.
- ▲ Debate some pros and cons of trapping furbearers.

## ▲ Academic Standards

This activity supports Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards for Environmental Education. Specifically, this activity can be used to achieve the following standards: Environmental Issue Investigation Skills (C.8.1, C.8.3, C.12.3) and Personal and Civic Responsibility (E.12.1).

## ▲ Materials

“Where do you stand? Statements” sheet (page 4) or other polarizing statements

## ▲ Key Points

- ▲ The kinds of wildlife that are trapped today are abundant; regulated trapping has never resulted in placement of a wildlife species on the federal or state endangered species lists.

- ▲ Sometimes an action that harms an individual animal may benefit wildlife populations.
- ▲ Scientific studies have sought and promoted regulations and capture methods to make trapping as humane as possible.
- ▲ Regulated trapping may reduce wildlife damage to crops and property, as well as threats to human health and safety in certain situations.
- ▲ Trapping is managed through scientifically based regulations that are strictly enforced by conservation wardens.

## ▲ Teacher Background

### 1. Historic Role

Trapping is an important part of the history of the Great Lakes area. For generations, Native Americans or First Nation people trapped animals for food and clothing. When Europeans came in pursuit of a shorter route to the Orient or following the lure of gold, they traded with the indigenous people for furs or learned how to trap for themselves. During the fur trade era, in the 1600s and 1700s, voyageurs paddled across the big lakes to rendezvous with others returning from northern rivers. It was the beaver that drew European interest to the area at this time. Beaver pelts were sent to Europe for processing, making them some of the first trade items extracted from North America. Even though explorations in the Great Lakes region didn't lead to the discovery of gold or a quick way to reach the silks and spices of Asia, people began to see North America as a source of wealth from natural resources. In this historical context, trapping is an integral part of environmental education in the Great Lakes region.

But why the beaver? Beaver, mink, otter, muskrats, fishers, martens, coyotes, wolves, and bobcats have a dense, thick, soft, and warm underfur growing beneath a top layer of guard hairs. This underfur keeps the animals



warm and animals with it are called furbearers. Other animals, such as deer, elk, moose, and tree squirrels rely on long, protective, sometimes hollow hairs to keep them warm, without underfur. Fur tends to be warmer, softer, thicker, and more durable than hair. Furbearers that, like the beaver, live in water have especially thick, short fur to keep warm even in icy water. It was these furs that were most desired by fur traders. Beaver pelts were sent to Europe where the guard hairs were sheared off. Then the underfur was removed from the skin and pressed, under intense heat, into felt. The felt was used to make top hats worn by the European and, eventually, the American elite.

In the days when people thought natural resources were unlimited and the market for fur was rewarding, competing companies over-harvested beaver and depleted fur resources. When beaver were largely trapped out, changes occurred on the landscape. Old beaver dams broke apart, creeks and rivers changed in depth or flow, fish habitat changed, some wetlands drained, grasses and shrubs replaced ponds, and new trees grew where their predecessors had been removed by industrious beavers. Soon, silk hats began to replace those made of beaver felt in the hierarchy of fashion and the market for beaver fur fell.

## 2. Changing Trends

Although Native Americans may have worn furs for warmth initially, furs have been more of a status symbol or fashion statement in European and American cultures. In the early 1900s, fur coats and mink stoles became symbols of glamour. It may not have been the beaver that made this significant fashion statement, but it was still fur. Then, in the later 1900s, opposition to trapping and wearing furs gained media attention. With the advent of easy-care synthetic fabrics, some people considered fur completely non-essential. Some people opposed trapping on the grounds that it can cause suffering to the individual animal caught in the trap, and

obtaining fur for glamour did not seem to justify the killing of animals.

Unlike synthetic fabrics, which are processed from petroleum products, the fur of wild animals represents a renewable natural resource. Although beaver populations were once diminished to the brink of extermination in the area, beaver numbers have risen again. Dwindling interest in trapping and the removal of most large predators left beaver populations relatively unchecked. As beaver and human populations have both been expanding, occasional conflicts have arisen. People complain when their basements flood or their fishing spots change because of beaver dams or their favorite birch tree is gnawed down by one of the large-toothed rodents. Some people have begun to realize that there may still be a role for trapping as a wildlife management tool today. While some people still oppose trapping, others choose to exercise their option to pursue this activity as licensed trappers. Understanding trapping in a modern-day context is important, particularly because of this continuing controversy.

## 3. Modern Trapping

Given that some people view trapping as an unnecessary activity that is cruel to the animal, why do some people still choose to trap? Largely, people still trap because they value the opportunity to learn about wildlife in a natural environment and to enjoy an outdoor activity that has been part of the lives of many people and cultures for hundreds of years. Some people trap to provide warm, functional, fashionable clothes, a source of additional healthy food, or additional income for the family. Biologists trap animals to help maintain healthy wildlife populations overall. They may trap to relocate an animal to an area where it once lived, to remove a problem animal from the population, to protect rare, endangered, or threatened species from predation and habitat damage caused by furbearers, or to collect ecological information about wildlife and wildlife diseases such as rabies.

Today, government agencies manage trapping through scientifically based regulations that regulate what kinds of animals can be trapped, how many can be trapped, when they can be trapped, and how they can be trapped. These regulations help ensure that none of our furbearers will be trapped out of existence in the wild. The kinds of wildlife that are trapped legally remain abundant. Regulated trapping does not cause wildlife populations to become endangered (in danger of extinction). In fact, sometimes trapping has provided individual animals to be transported from one location to another in order to repopulate an area with a species killed off or endangered by changes to the habitat or previously unregulated harvesting. Conservation wardens strictly enforce trapping regulations to ensure the numbers of animals killed are limited. Trained natural resource professionals continually review and develop rules and regulations for trapping. Through scientific studies, the methods of trapping and the types of traps used are changing to make trapping more humane for the animal and safe for the trapper. Trapper education, a critical component of regulated trapping, is mandatory in some states. Trapper education provides participants with basic knowledge on ecology and behavior of furbearers, laws and regulations, trapping and furbearer handling skills, landowner respect, trapper responsibility and ethics, and care and respect for all natural resources. Education programs that look at the trapping controversy help reach current and future trappers with these messages, as well as put trapping in a new context for today's students interested in wildlife and the outdoors.

While being caught in a trap is not a pleasant experience for the trapped animal, regulated trapping does offer benefits to wildlife populations as a whole and to people. If there were no trapping, we could not reintroduce or monitor endangered or threatened species, prevent furbearers from becoming over-populated, protect other managed species from over-predation by hungry predatory



furbearers, remove problem wildlife that are damaging crops/property or presenting health and safety risks to people. If biologists want to protect wolves, for example, and a lone wolf begins preying on calves in a dairy or beef farm, it may be necessary to trap and dispense that one problem wolf. That way the farmers and the rest of the wolves can live compatibly side-by-side. Or, as another example, biologists might use trapping to protect rare, threatened, or endangered species, such as whooping cranes and piping plovers, from habitat damage by beavers or predation by foxes and coyotes.

Some people object to trapping animals for fur because they perceive this to be a luxury item in the U.S. rather than necessary for warmth. Warm materials made from other natural fibers, such as wool and cotton, however, do not come without some costs to the environment. Consider the impacts of sheep grazing on grasslands and pesticide-use on fields of cotton. In addition, most American furs end up in northern regions of Europe and Asia, where their warmth is important. People in some cultures in northern China, Russia, Japan, Scandinavian countries, and Canada still depend on the warmth and protection of fur garments in harsh environments. Even if an animal is trapped primarily for its fur, other parts of the animal can be used for food or to make products such as soap, paint, and lubricants. How different is this from the killing of domestic animals for food, leather to make shoes and belts, etc.?

Some people object to the perceived indiscriminate nature of trapping. These people are often concerned that pets may get caught in traps intended for wildlife. Most experienced trappers take great care and concern to place traps where they will assure select catches. Trapper education programs help teach new trappers to choose the proper trap and set it in a fashion and location most likely to catch the selected animal, and catch it in the most humane way. Some traps are

designed to kill the animal relatively quickly. In some cases, this may be the most humane way to avoid suffering. Modern foothold traps are designed to hold an animal's foot with as little stress as possible. Whether the trapper intends to market the fur or release the animal, it is in the interest of the trapper to avoid injury to the animal. Being killed by a trapper may not seem like a happy end to an animal's life, but all animals die and the other forms of death—starvation, disease, freezing, being eaten by a predator, being hit by a car or killed by some other accident—may be even more unpleasant. The main difference is that the trapper is trained, licensed, and regulated to perform in a manner that puts humane treatment of animals foremost.

#### 4. Summary

There are many different ways of looking at trapping. Clearly, trapping has played an important role in the history of the Great Lakes region. Understanding trapping in a modern-day context is also important. This classroom activity is intended to explore different perspectives and interest students in thinking about the issue.



#### ▲ Procedure

1 Tell students one end of the wall represents a position that strongly agrees with a statement; the other end of the wall represents strong disagreement. The space in between, all along the wall, represents the continuum between the two opposing viewpoints. Label the two ends of the wall so there is no confusion regarding which is which. Explain that you will read a statement and the students are to move to the spot on the wall which best represents their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statement and that you will ask some of them why they are standing where they are on the continuum.

2 Read a statement. Have students move to a spot on the agree-disagree continuum. When they have settled, ask a student to explain why she is standing where she is. It helps to ask the people standing in the more extreme positions first, the outliers, and then to ask for additional opinions from those remaining mid-stream. Sometimes people will be standing right next to each other, but with very different reasoning. Or, sometimes people appear at opposite ends of the continuum, but for similar reasons. There's no need to ask for each person's explanation for each statement, but be sure everyone is included at least once in the course of the activity. Solicit student responses to one another ("What do you think about what he said?") so the activity becomes an active discussion among the students. When questions that could benefit from the input of factual information are raised, you, as the educator, can step in and share information from the background provided or from other sources. The key points listed above may serve as a convenient reference.

3 As the discussion winds down on a statement, invite anyone who wants to move to a different place on the continuum to do so. If anyone moves, ask what motivated the person to move. Discuss what factors can influence us to change our minds about controversial topics. Sometimes people change their stance on an issue simply because of where their friends are standing (a valuable comment on peer pressure and how others influence our thinking). Connect this to the rising and falling fashions of furs.

4 When you have adequately explored one statement, repeat the procedure with another, etc.





## ▲ Where Do You Stand? Statements

- 1 All trapping should be illegal.
- 2 Trapping only hurts wildlife.
- 3 Trapping has caused serious population declines in some animals.
- 4 Trapping had a significant impact on North American history.
- 5 Trapping is a relic of history and has no place in our modern day lives.
- 6 Trapping regulations help protect wildlife today.
- 7 It's okay to trap individual animals that endanger people's health or safety.
- 8 It's okay to trap animals that are very common.
- 9 It's okay to trap animals for fur.
- 10 People should be able to get rid of animals that cause damage to crops or other property.
- 11 Trapping helps endangered species.
- 12 Modern day trapping has never caused a species to become endangered.
- 13 Foothold traps should be illegal.
- 14 We should promote trapper education programs.
- 15 Trapping is a legitimate outdoor activity that is highly regulated.
- 16 People should be able to trap any animals they want on their own land.
- 17 Trapper education should be mandatory.
- 18 Trapping helps control the spread of wildlife diseases.
- 19 No one should wear fur.

## ▲ Discussion

Discuss the following questions with the class:

- ▲ Have you ever known someone who traps animals? For what purpose does s/he trap them?
- ▲ Have you ever seen or heard of a wild animal creating problems for people? What kind of problems were they and how did the people handle the problems?
- ▲ Is using a mousetrap any different than using a foothold trap? How do you feel about trapping mice in your house?
- ▲ How could trapping some problem wildlife ever help the whole population?
- ▲ Do you feel any differently about trapping animals for food than you do about trapping them for fur?
- ▲ How is trapping different today than it was during the days of the voyagers?
- ▲ What do you think would happen if no one were ever allowed to trap an animal again?
- ▲ How do people arrive at their values? What factors influenced your opinions in this activity?

## ▲ Extensions

- ▲ Have students tally how many individuals are standing in each zone of the continuum and graph the percentages agreeing and disagreeing.

- ▲ Have students research a related topic such as use of traps for working with endangered species.
- ▲ Invite a trapper into the classroom to explain how s/he places the traps for the optimum opportunity to trap only the target animal.
- ▲ Have students interview a wildlife biologist about trapping as a tool in his profession.
- ▲ Have students form teams and debate the ethics of trapping: to trap or not to trap. Provide background material from state trappers' associations, animal rights organizations, and wildlife biologists.
- ▲ Have students do a history report comparing trapping in the 1700s to modern day trapping.



## ▲ Assessment

- ▲ Tally where students stand in the beginning. Ask the first question again at the end of the discussion and see if the explanations have differed. Tally the numbers standing in each part of the continuum again.
- ▲ Ask students to write a short report on the impact of trapping on North America in the 1700s.
- ▲ Have students write an article on the role of trapping in wildlife management today.
- ▲ Observe a student debate on trapping and note points raised.

## Production Credits

Developed by Susan C. Gilchrist, Bureau of Integrated Science Services, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 1350 Femrite Dr., Monona, WI 53716

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