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# Steel Leghold Traps

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When people make a case against the steel leghold trap they usually cite emotional issues such as the inadvertent trapping of children or pets. Whereas these traps are responsible for some such incidents, it is not this that speaks loudly for the discontinuation of these devices. By analogy, the fact that many children and pets succumb to automobiles every year is not sufficient reason to ban automobiles.

The case against using these traps does not rest with the fact that the furs so taken are unnecessary luxuries. Although the capricious taste of the consumer is the *raison d'être* for trapping, it is no more damning than other commercial ventures which exploit animals, or humans for that matter. The fact that synthetic fibers can produce similar and better products than natural furs is evidence that the latter are unnecessary but still does not make a strong case against trapping.

The case against the use of steel leghold traps rests mainly in the *unnecessary* pain and suffering they inflict on the animals caught. The design of steel leghold traps is such that, for any given animal, the trap must hold the incarcerated tissue firmly enough to prevent escape. This might not cause *tremendous* pain if the trap was small and if the animal did not struggle to free itself. However, this conclusion begs the question of two very important issues, namely that the traps are selective and that the trapped animal resigns itself to its fate.

Steel leghold traps cannot be considered selective except in a negative fashion, i.e., an animal not heavy enough to depress the trip pan or an

animal with appendages too large to insert through the open trap. In all other cases, whether by design or by accident, any animal tripping the pan will have the potential of being trapped. So-called nontarget animals are caught frequently. During a five year study conducted by the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests, the ratio of unwanted animals to target animals caught was greater than 2:1.<sup>1</sup> Other studies have shown higher ratios of unwanted to wanted animals. Of course, when a pregnant or nursing animal is trapped, this compounds the number of animals killed.

I know of no animal that would initially remain still when caught in a steel leghold trap, or any other trap for that matter. Thus, the stimulation of pain receptors caused by the sudden closure of the trap is aggravated by the struggles of the animal. These struggles have been known to be violent enough to eventually cause laceration and severance of limbs, depending on the intrinsic nature of the animal caught. It is not being anthropomorphic to assume that vertebrates, particularly mammals, have similar thresholds to and awareness of pain; this is a fundamental fact of biology.<sup>2</sup> As one neurophysiologist put it, "To deny the existence of conscious pain perception in mammals is to be totally blind to their non-verbal communication and ignorant of basic comparative anatomy and physiology. It is like denying the earth's rotation around the sun. It is that fundamental."<sup>3</sup> If a physical insult causes pain in a human, from whom a subjective analysis is possible, it certainly causes similar pain in a nonhuman animal.

Other elements add to the discomfort of the trapped animal. Adverse weather, exposure to predators, and the terror and suffering simply due to being trapped all need to be considered. Rather than make us skeptics, our inability to prove the latter type of suffering should make us more sensitive to the possibility. Only the most anthropocentric individual would question the idea that something causing stress or suffering in humans probably causes similar changes in animals.

In testimony to the inherent cruelty of steel leghold traps, over 50 countries have already banned their use and several of our states have either banned or significantly restricted their use. In spite of this, trapping continues. If using these traps causes unnecessary pain, and if unnecessary pain is considered inhumane, what are the compelling reasons for its continuation?

One of the most important reasons for trapping, according to proponents, is the prevention of wildlife overpopulation. However, there is no evidence that trapping in the manner it is done now, is an effective and efficient means of controlling a particular wildlife population, largely due to the inherent nonselective nature of the trap. Animals that "should" be culled, the weak and unfit, are not necessarily the ones trapped. Besides, the argument from the standpoint of management is extremely weak and smug. Notwithstanding exclamations that we are part of nature, we humans have not been very circumspect in our dealings with our environment. We have polluted the water, land, and air; we have

caused numerous species of animals and plants to become extinct; we have significantly disturbed such delicate ecosystems as the tropical rain forests so that they are in danger of being lost; and we have not been able to control and feed our own population. The argument of management pales when compared to our blundering. Furthermore, two years after banning the steel leghold trap in Florida, the Everglades Regional Manager stated that "... We have not found it necessary to implement any control measures for wildlife populations that we did not have before the ban on trapping."<sup>4</sup>

Prevention of various diseases by reducing the natural reservoirs is often touted as an important result of trapping. Diseases such as tularemia, mange and rabies are listed as being effectively controlled by the trapper's efforts. Except for rabies, none of the diseases usually mentioned are significant, particularly since they require direct human contact and only a trapper or hunter would ordinarily be involved. Since these people can choose what they will, it seems that they implicitly accept such risks.

Rabies, however, is an important disease that should be controlled as much as is practical. Nevertheless, there is *no* proof that trapping has any effect on the natural reservoir in a particular area. The Council on Environmental Quality has found that "... The contention that rabies increases dramatically when steel leghold traps are banned seems entirely without merit."<sup>4</sup> The National Research Council recommended that "Persistent trapping or poisoning campaigns as a means to rabies control should be abolished. There is no evidence that these ... programs reduce either wildlife reservoirs or rabies incidence."<sup>5</sup>

Besides stemming wildlife populations to prevent human disease and inconvenience, trappers claim that they do it for the "good of the animal." In a brochure distributed by the Fur Takers of America International, they go so far as to state that a fox, if asked, would approve of trapping because it "... Keeps us healthy by saving us from epidemics of misery!" It is also stated in this brochure that most wild animals die violently in nature, and that death at the hands of the trapper is "humane." Besides being incorrect (traps are painful, foxes do not voice opinions, trapped animals are allowed to be killed in any manner the trapper wishes), these and similar lines of argument wrongly assume that there is an accu-

rate network for trapper information on animal populations and that trappers believe and abide by this information.<sup>6,7</sup> It takes very little thought, however, to come to the conclusion that the price of furs (pelts) is the only parameter a trapper uses and that this would tend to work against efforts at truly controlling a particular population.

Trappers attempt to minimize the painful nature of traps with various specious arguments. They state that the trapped limb becomes numb, that they find animals asleep in traps, and that most states require traps to be examined every 24 hours. It is probably true that, after an indeterminate period, the limb may become numb at the area of contact, but other areas would still be sensitive and a continuous throbbing pain might not be difficult to imagine. Assuming that trappers do abide by the 24 hour rule (many states require inspection every 48 hours or have no restriction at all), how many hours of being in pain are acceptable? Even knowing the pain would end at 24 hours would hardly make it hurt less. And, after a period of futile attempts to escape, what is so surprising about an animal attempting to sleep? Prisoners on death row, knowing that they will die the next day, manage to sleep; people injured in accidents manage to sleep, despite pain not alleviated by drugs.

What alternatives are there to steel leghold traps? First, other than for the financial return associated with furs, there is little evidence that these traps are beneficial or necessary. Moreover, the furs are not necessary for our survival. Therefore, there seems to be little reason to look for an alternative; discontinuation of the practice would do just fine. However, the pressure from consumers is not likely to abate in the very near future and, from a practical standpoint, a humane alternative is needed. Unfortunately, there is no consistently successful, universally accepted alternative. The Conibear Instant Kill Trap is a possibility and has been satisfactorily substituted for the leghold variety by many trappers. It does have the potential for maiming, and it kills all who enter the trap. Many trappers contend the leghold type is better because it allows them the opportunity to release unwanted animals, if they are still alive when found. But this is misleading because many of those animals are too debilitated to compete in the wild and die later. Essentially all raptors that fall prey to these traps must be killed or kept in captivity because the damage

to their source of livelihood, their legs, often results in amputation.<sup>8</sup>

Another possibility is the live trap ("box," pipe, or wire cage). Although these would cause significant stress to the animals, the benefits would seem to outweigh this. Unwanted animals would rarely be harmed and could be released. Trappers, however, feel these traps are prohibitively expensive. Can we put a price on pain and suffering? Besides, as in any other commercial venture, the cost of producing a product is passed on to the consumer.

As I understand it, an important part of a veterinarian's responsibilities is to relieve pain and suffering in animals regardless of whether they are pets or are destined to be our food. It would seem logical to extend this responsibility to our dealings with wildlife. Despite the fact that many veterinarians may participate in consumptive activities such as hunting or fishing, I would think they would be opposed to inflicting unnecessary pain on the animals involved. Yet, as a profession, we have not taken a firm stand against something as fundamentally inhumane as the steel leghold trap. □

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