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Apparel of Misery

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Summary

This paper discusses the issues surrounding the trapping or raising of wild animals for their fur. It points out the pain and suffering inflicted upon these animals and the extreme inhumanity of many of the traps used in capturing them.

Keywords: animal welfare, furs, injury, ranch-raised, trapping, traps, wildlife

From the perspective of any compassionate and informed person, there is tremendous cruelty associated with the fur industry. Most of the animals² are trapped with steel jaw leghold traps. These animals, whether of a species considered endangered or 'common', endure extreme suffering before being killed by the trapper or dying of exposure. If the fur comes from an animal raised in captivity, the cruelty is only marginally less, despite claims to the contrary.

All mammals have similar nervous systems and thresholds for pain³. It is not being anthropomorphic, therefore, to state that what is painful to a human would cause similar pain to another mammal. The design of steel jaw leghold traps is such that 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 herself or himself. To make this conclusion, however, would be to ignore two very important issues: the struggles of the trapped animal and the lack of selectivity of the trap.

I have never seen an animal remain still when caught in a steel jaw leghold trap (or any trap). The stimulation of pain receptors caused by the sudden closure of the trap around the limb is aggravated by the struggles of the animal. These struggles are violent enough to cause laceration of skin and other soft tissues, fracturing of bone, dislocation of joints, and severing of limbs, depending on the force of the struggles and the type of animal. Even if the trap has 'offset' jaws, the gap between the closed jaws always is less than the diameter of the bone of the trapped limb and severe injury still can occur⁴.

Trappers state that the trapped limb becomes numb. Whereas the part of the limb distal (away from the body) to the point of contact with the trap jaws could become numb (after an indeterminable period), the tissue caught in the jaws would not be numb. There still would be extreme pain with every movement of the animal.

Other elements add to the discomfort and misery of the trapped animal: adverse weather, exposure to predators, and the terror and suffering a 'wild' (free-living) animal experiences simply from being restrained. Females with nursing young may experience additional fear or anxiety because of strong maternal instincts. Several hours to many days may pass before the trapper arrives. Prior to this the animal may have died from dehydration, starvation or freezing. If not, death at the trapper's hands may not be quick. For example, it may be brought about slowly, by suffocation through the trapper standing on the animal's neck or chest.

Trappers claim that the painful nature of traps is reduced by laws requiring them to examine their

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This paper is part of a series on exploitation of non-human beings by human beings. See the first paper for arguments on the [moral value of non-human animals in general](#).

2 Purely for the sake of convenience, I may refer to animals other than human beings as "animals", recognising that all are animals of one kind or another; there is no intention to imply that any, even a human, is morally superior or intrinsically more valuable than another.

3 [Ruch 1965](#)

4 [Van Ballenberghe 1984-10-01](#)

traps every day and remove any animals caught. Such laws only exist in some states in the US and enforcement is not feasible nor practical. Many states allow longer intervals between inspections, and some have no limits at all. Furthermore, there is no limit to the amount of time animals trapped for predator 'control' are left in the traps. Nevertheless, even if trappers did abide by a 24 hour rule, how many hours of being in pain are acceptable? Even with daily checking of traps, this will not prevent serious injury⁵.

Another defence trappers use to deny the suffering of the trapped animals is their observation that some animals are 'asleep' in the traps. There are at least two explanations for this phenomenon, assuming it is true. One explanation is that the animal may succumb to sleep after a period of futile attempts to escape. This is not, however, evidence that the traps do not cause pain. People injured in accidents manage to sleep despite being in pain. The other possibility is that the trapped animal succumbs to a well known phenomenon: learned helplessness⁶. In this situation, the animal being subjected to noxious stimuli from which there is no escape 'learns' that struggling will not help and eventually gives up.

Some of my veterinary colleagues defend the use of the steel jaw leghold trap by comparing it to commonly used veterinary instruments, such as the Barnes dehorner or the Burdizzo emasculator. These devices are often used without providing pain relief to the victims and cause excruciating pain. Comparing the steel jaw leghold trap, however, to *equally cruel instruments* in no way defends the trap. Instead, it highlights the cruelty of 'standard veterinary practice' when instruments like these routinely are used without providing anaesthesia to the animals. Moreover, these devices do not hold the animal for long periods, a factor which greatly increases the suffering caused by the leghold trap.

There also is the issue of 'nontarget' animals who are trapped with the steel jaw leghold trap.⁷ Trappers callously refer to these animals as 'trash'. Because steel jaw leghold traps are not selective, any animal tripping the pan may be caught. So-called nontarget animals frequently are caught, and number in the millions every year. 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 2:1⁸. Other studies have shown higher ratios of unwanted to wanted animals. When a nursing animal is trapped, this compounds the number of animals killed.

According to proponents, one of the most important reasons for trapping is the prevention of wildlife 'overpopulation'. The trappers state that the primary objective is to kill 'surplus furbearers', claiming that those not 'harvested' will be killed by predators. There is no evidence, however, that trapping is an effective and efficient means of controlling wildlife populations. Animals who are likely to die or are killed by predators – the weak and unfit – are not necessarily the ones trapped, nor are these the type of animals the trapper wants. As an example of the lack of credibility of the 'management' argument, two years after the steel jaw leghold trap was banned in Florida, the Everglades Regional Manager stated: "We have not found it necessary to implement any control measures for wildlife populations that we did not have before the ban on trapping [in Florida]"⁹.

Prevention of the spread of various diseases to humans by reducing the natural reservoirs often is touted as an important benefit of trapping. Diseases such as tularaemia, mange, and rabies are listed as being effectively controlled by trappers' efforts. There is no evidence that such a claim is true. Moreover, except for rabies, none of the diseases usually mentioned are of serious concern to humans, particularly because they require direct contact and only a trapper or hunter ordinarily

5 [Van Ballenberghe 1984-10-01](#)

6 [Friend 1991-01-01](#); [McBride 1984-02-01](#)

7 [University of British Columbia 2022-08-25](#)

8 [Ontario Department of Lands and Forests 1959-11-01](#)

9 [US Congress 1975](#)

would be involved. Because these people presumably have free will, it seems they implicitly accept such risks.

Even though rabies is an important disease, there is no proof that trapping has any effect on the natural reservoir in a particular region¹⁰. The Council on Environmental Quality has found: "The contention that rabies increases dramatically when steel leghold traps are banned seems entirely without merit"¹¹. The National Research Council recommended: "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"¹². The National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians also have a similar view: "Continuous and persistent programs for trapping or poisoning wildlife are not effective in reducing wildlife rabies reservoirs on a statewide basis"¹³.

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 International¹⁴, they go so far as to state that a fox, if asked, would approve of trapping because it "...keep[s] us healthy by saving us from epidemics of misery..." It also is 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 to us, 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 accurate network for trapper information on animal populations and that trappers believe and abide by this information¹⁵. It takes very little thought, however, to come to the realisation 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 population¹⁶.

Many trappers contend the steel jaw leghold trap allows them the opportunity to release unwanted animals (if they still are alive when found). This is misleading, however, because many of those animals are too debilitated from the damage caused by the trap to compete for survival, and die later as a result of their injuries¹⁷. For example, essentially all raptors (birds of prey) who are victims of these traps sustain severely debilitating injury, particularly to their legs, which renders them unable to survive in a free-living state¹⁸. This is true even with so-called padded traps. Whereas trappers have tried to convince society that the 'padding' prevents damage, therefore causing less pain, this is not true. Several studies have been done comparing the effects of 'padded' versus unpadded traps on various animals, and have shown that both could and did cause the same degree of damage to a limb, including laceration of skin and fracture of bones¹⁹.

Trappers and those who support trapping often point out that some states require potential trappers to attend and pass a 'training' course. It should be obvious, however, that no amount of training will reduce the agony and suffering of a trapped animal. In replying to the sentiment that these courses are beneficial, one licensed trapper in Connecticut wrote: "[the person] is either describing his hallucinations, or he is...pulling the wool over the reader's eyes"²⁰. This same trapper

¹⁰ [Brown et al 2016-03-01](#); [Fischman 1984-03-01](#); [Kennedy et al 1973](#); [US Congress 1975](#)

¹¹ [US Congress 1975](#)

¹² [Kennedy et al 1973](#)

¹³ [Brown et al 2016-03-01](#)

¹⁴ [Fur Takers of America undated](#)

¹⁵ [Clouser 1969](#); [Reid 1971-04-01](#)

¹⁶ [Siemer et al 1994-03-01](#)

¹⁷ [Atkeson 1956-07-01](#); [Englund 1982-10-01](#); [Kuehn et al 1986-01-01](#); [Macpherson 1969](#); [Van Ballenberghe 1984-10-01](#)

¹⁸ [Durham 1981](#)

¹⁹ [Durham 1981](#); [Gruver et al 1996-03-01](#); [New Jersey Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife 1984-11-01](#); [Olsen et al 1986-09-01](#), [1988-09-01](#); [Phillips et al 1996-06-01](#); [University of Georgia undated](#)

²⁰ [Mannetti 1985-12-21](#)

explained how such courses taught trappers how to manipulate habitats in order to increase numbers of target species.

In testimony to the inherent cruelty of steel jaw leghold traps, over 64 countries already have banned their use, and several of the US states have either banned or substantially restricted their use.²¹ The American Animal Hospital Association, which represents a substantial number of veterinarians, is on record as opposing these traps²². Even the conservative American Veterinary Medical Association has instituted policy that is not in support of these traps²³. Other than for the financial return associated with furs, there is little evidence that these traps are beneficial or necessary in this country. Even some furriers realise the cruelty of these devices as illustrated by the following statement referring to the efforts of others to outlaw furs in general: "...we *hand them...the most damaging evidence in our continued use of the leghold trap*"²⁴. Frank Conibear, a long-time trapper, became disillusioned with these traps, stating: "*It is probable that no instrument was ever invented that caused as much suffering as the common steel trap. Its continued use is the greatest blot on civilization today.*"²⁵

The fur industry promotes 'ranch fur'—wild animals raised in captivity—which downplays animals trapped for their skins. Animals raised for their fur, however, are subjected to inhumane conditions of housing and care and morbidity and mortality can be substantial²⁶. They are kept under crowded and often filthy conditions in cages which provide for none of their behavioural or social needs. These animals are not domesticated, and, therefore, have not adapted to being incarcerated. Because of this, being raised in cages places additional and continuous stress on them. That they may reproduce or survive until they are killed for their fur is not testimony to their well-being. Growth can and does occur under the most deplorable of conditions. For many species, reproduction is so strong an instinct that it is one of the last behaviours to cease even under adverse conditions.

Methods used to kill 'ranch raised' animals include poisoning, suffocation, drowning, clubbing, strangulation, asphyxiation with crude carbon monoxide chambers²⁷ and electrocution using inefficient methods. There are no laws or regulations which govern how these animals are raised or killed. The situation is left strictly up to the conscience and abilities of the operator and even the best of situations is problematical²⁸. Expediency and economy, not humanity, are key considerations.

Trappers, furriers and some others defend the trapping or raising of animals for their skins because they assert that furs are an efficient use of energy ('renewable resource') compared with synthetic 'furs'. This simply is not true. The energy cost, much of it coming from petroleum products, to

21 As of 1999, Colorado and Massachusetts have the strongest anti-trapping laws in the nation, barring the use of any body-gripping traps (except common mouse and rat traps). There is a limited exception in both states allowing people who have used other methods to control problem animals, and failed, to obtain a permit to obtain an otherwise prohibited trap for 30 days. Arizona has the same prohibitions, but it just applies to public lands (83% of the state). New Jersey and Florida ban all steel-jaw traps, but allow other body-gripping traps. Rhode Island basically bans steel-jaw traps as well. Connecticut allows the use of some padded traps. California only allows the use of padded traps. California no longer allows the use of any leghold traps, but this was being contested.

I am grateful to Wayne Pacelle, who provided most of this information.

22 [AAHA 2014-11-01](#)

23 [AVMA 2025-09-12](#)

24 [Dwan 1984-10-29](#)

25 [Conibear 1957-01-01](#)

26 [Clifton 1991-11-01](#); [Schneider & Hunter 1993-02-01](#)

27 [Anon 1998-11-01](#)

28 [Cooper et al 1998-09-26](#)

produce an item of apparel from a trapped free-living animal is almost *four times* that required to produce a similar item composed of synthetic materials²⁹. As for the energy requirements to produce apparel made from 'ranch' animals, it and the impact on the environment are substantially greater than to make similar apparel from synthetic materials³⁰. Far from being 'renewable resources' which save on energy, apparel made from the skins of animals consume more precious irreplaceable energy resources than do those made from artificial fibres. Bear in mind that the suffering and death of these animals is aimed at providing someone with a 'luxury', not a necessity for life.

Trappers and furriers also try to justify their actions by pointing to consumer demands for their product, yet the breeding aspect of this had to be subsidised by the US government in order to keep the industry solvent³¹. Most consumers, however, have no idea about the *real* price of fur apparel. The majority I and others have educated are appalled at the means by which furs are procured.

We need a more compassionate view towards our fellow inhabitants. Financial gain catering to the capricious desires of the public – and a minority at that – must not be tolerated. It would be well to remember that animals used and killed by the fur industry are independent beings with lives and interests independent of ours. We *share* – not own – this planet with them.

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²⁹ [Smith 1979-09-01](#)

³⁰ [Bijleveld 2013-06-01](#); [Smith 1979-09-01](#)

³¹ [Dixon 1992-01-01](#)

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- i Study done on Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge (1949-1955), Alabama. Found high rates of crippling (generally around 25%).

"Information gathered in projects involving the use of steel traps to live-trap fur bearers for restocking purposes has shown that a high percentage of the trapped animals die."

- ii Georgia Mason of University of Oxford found that this is inhumane because the mink can detect the gas and then try to avoid it.
- iii "High concentrations of carbon dioxide are commonly used to kill mink before their pelts are removed. The aversiveness of this procedure was investigated by using a passive avoidance technique. Eight mink were trained to obtain a reward (a novel object) by entering a chamber which could be filled with carbon dioxide, as under commercial conditions (over 80 per cent by volume). In the absence of carbon dioxide, mink entered the chamber within a mean (sd) of 16 (2.1) seconds and spent 45 (12) per cent of the next 10 minutes interacting with the novel object. When there was carbon dioxide in the test chamber, the mink would not enter it and coughed and recoiled from the chamber's entrance instead. It was concluded that the mink detected and avoided high concentrations of carbon dioxide, and that if mink are to be killed humanely, less aversive techniques should be used."
- iv "The Agriculture Department has spent \$6 million to help the struggling U.S. mink industry promote its pelts among wealthy Japanese shoppers and Italian designers..."
- v There were numerous broken teeth.

"Thirty percent of the foxes caught in unmodified leg-hold traps had broken bones, in most cases the phalanges or metacarpals... A higher percentage of the foxes taken in modified [surfaces covered with plastic] leghold traps had broken bones..."

- vi "Observed injuries were similar in both trap types. ... Injuries, such as joint luxations and bone fractures, were noted more frequently for coyotes trapped in standard Soft Catch traps."
- vii "Broken, chipped, or dislodged teeth occurred in 89 (44%) adults and in 15 (14%) juveniles..." Individuals also suffered lacerations, joint dislocations and fractures of bones.
- viii "[The trapped foxes] may swallow fragments of their teeth broken off in biting at the trap, and sometimes parts of a mangled foot; almost every stomach contains some fox fur, and a considerable number contain pieces of skin, claws, or bits of bone."
- ix "All models of padded foothold traps reduced but did not eliminate trap-related foot injuries in coyotes and kit foxes."
- x Although there was some difference for some species in number of severely damaged limbs, the padded trap would cause damage. For some species, there was no difference in the injury level.
- xi Mortality ranged from 0.2% to 10.1%.

"Nursing disease (56%) was the most common diagnosis, followed by mastitis (11%), metritis (8%), and dystocia (7%)."

- xii "A strong association was found between trapping inactivity and low pelt prices."
- xiii "Very severe, potentially life threatening injuries (class IV) occurred in 11% of all captures involving traps."

"Only 14 captures involved traps with offset jaws and teeth. Three of these resulted in class IV injuries of the foot demonstrating that such injuries are possible even if the foot is held from slipping between the trap jaws."

"Tooth, lip, and gum injuries occurred in 50 (46%) of 109 captures of wolves in steel traps. Tooth injuries ranged from breakage of one or two small teeth to breakage of all four canine teeth plus several other incisors and premolars. Lip and gum injuries included abrasions and lacerations often accompanied by severe edema."

"Steel traps, as used in this study, produced a high rate of severe injuries even when checked daily."