

# While the World Moves On, U.S. Still Caught in Its Traps

Although more than 85 countries have banned or heavily restricted the use of steel-jaw leghold traps, the United States—one of the world’s largest fur producing and consuming nations—continues to defend these inhumane devices.

Each year, millions of animals are killed for their fur in the United States, and many suffer prolonged deaths in traps. An extremely conservative figure of 4.9 million furbearers met this fate in 2010, and in 2011 that figure rose to 6.8 million. It should be noted that these figures are most certainly gross underestimates, as they were compiled by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) and rely on data from state game agencies, a number of which failed to submit any data at all.

Among the most commonplace—and most egregious—devices used to capture furbearers and other species are steel-jaw traps. Acknowledging the extreme and unnecessary cruelty associated with steel-jaw traps, the National Animal Control Association and American Animal Hospital Association have condemned the devices.

Any unsuspecting animal may be lured into a trap by following bait or scent to an area where the trap has been hidden beneath dirt and/or leaves. The trap is powered by as many as four coil springs, two long springs, or a single spring underneath the trap. When the animal steps on the pan of the trap, it releases two opposing steel jaws to slam violently together on a leg or paw. The jaws clamp tightly on the limb to prevent the animal from pulling free. Injuries are caused both from the force of the jaws coming together and from the tight clamp they keep on the victim. Blood flow is restricted to the limb, if not cut off altogether, leading often to gangrene. In freezing temperatures, the portion of the limb below the jaws is likely to get frostbite—ensuring permanent disability of any non-target animals who are caught. Further injuries are incurred as the animal struggles desperately to get free. Trapped animals frequently suffer extreme edematous swelling, torn or severed tendons and ligaments, and broken teeth and bones; some even chew off their own limbs to escape on three legs—called “wring off” by the trappers.

If the animal is still alive when found in the trap, guidance provided to trappers in the form of state-issued trapping manuals instructs them to kill an animal by delivering a blow to the head (by using a club, shovel, or metal pipe) or via suffocation, instructing a trapper to stand on the animal’s chest or choke the animal. Fur trappers do not typically shoot trapped animals because bullet holes can damage pelts and reduce the value of furs.

Some states not only permit steel-jaw traps, they permit traps with “teeth” on the jaws that inflict puncture wounds and add to the suffering caused. Traps, called “double-jaw,” may have a second jaw below the primary one, or an “auxiliary arm.” Both are intended to prevent wring-off. The “stop-loss” trap—originally designed for muskrats, who are known to chew off trapped limbs to escape—is a steel-jaw trap equipped with an auxiliary arm that, when triggered, holds the victim away from the trapped limb so he or she is unable to chew it off and escape. Trappers have reported catching muskrats with one, two and even three

feet missing from repeated capture in these devices. The trappers don't use these modifications to benefit the animals; they exist solely to prevent escape.

Another variation on the steel-jaw leghold trap is the so-called padded trap. Although it may sound like two pillows coming together to gently hold an animal, these devices are virtually identical to their non-padded counterparts except for the addition of thin strips of hard rubber attached to the trap's jaws.

Lastly, there is the "jump" trap—steel-jaw traps with a spring beneath the pan of the trap. As the name implies, this trap is intended to jump when triggered, thereby capturing animals higher on their limbs than other steel-jaw traps. The higher catch is to prevent animals from pulling their limbs out of the traps or chewing off a paw to escape.

Despite the wide range of modifications that may be employed, no steel-jaw trap has been created that has reduced animal suffering to an acceptable level. The jaws of a leghold trap must slam together with tremendous force to quickly catch the animal's limb, and they must clamp together with sufficient force to prevent an animal from pulling free—it is this basic operating principal that makes such traps brutal regardless of the modifications made.

### Regulations and Adjustments

Although technically regulated at the state level, trapping is often subject to minimal restrictions, and regulations that do exist in many instances are poorly enforced.

Only a minority of states have banned or restricted the use of steel-jaw traps. Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Washington have limited the use of leghold traps. The New Jersey law is particularly strong, establishing an outright ban on the manufacture, sale, possession, import, transport, and use of steel-jaw leghold devices.

In some states, trappers are not even required to check their traps (and release non-target animals) within a certain time frame; in Montana and Alaska, for instance, there is no mandatory trap check time for most leghold traps, while Wyoming trappers are directed to check leghold traps just once every 72 hours. Where trap-check standards are in place, they are often weak and unenforced. Where trap check times have been established for "furbearers" and other categories of animals, species classified as "non-game" or "predatory"—such as coyotes—may be excluded, allowing victims to suffer indefinitely. New Mexico, for example, excludes coyotes from existing trap check standards. Moreover, there is generally a shortage of enforcement personnel to ensure compliance with existing trapping regulations. Little attention is given to evaluating the impact of these trapping practices on wildlife populations, and relaxed licensing and record-keeping requirements compound this problem. For instance, New York law does not mandate reporting for furbearers other than bobcats, and a number of states from Nevada to Virginia do not require trapper education courses in order to obtain a permit.

Trap monitoring devices, which have been researched at USDA's National Wildlife Research Center, can reduce the suffering that results from prolonged struggles in leghold traps. Trap monitoring devices consist of transmitter equipment that serves to notify trappers when a trap has been triggered and the animal has been caught, so that trappers may go to trap sites and release or kill the animals rather than leaving them to suffer for days. Unfortunately, there is no mandate for use of these monitors, and they are not used under most circumstances.

Tranquilizer trap devices (TTDs) also have the potential to reduce the suffering of trapped animals. TTDs are devices that contain a tranquilizer and are attached to traps. When captured, the animal bites at a

bulb containing the tranquilizer, thereby ingesting it. The trapped animal is sedated. Studies indicate that TTDs can substantially reduce injury and are a promising means to reduce animal suffering. Unfortunately, their use is limited to certain situations and can only be deployed by federal agents since it involves a controlled substance.

### Best Management Practices

AFWA, representing the 50 state agencies; federal agencies responsible for natural resources management; and provincial, territorial and national government agencies in Canada, promotes “best management practices,” or BMPs, as a substitute for mandatory welfare-based measures. The BMP Trap-Testing Program claims to represent progress in exploring trap standards and establishes a trap certification process based on sound science and research. Non-binding guidelines are featured on state agencies’ websites and touted as research-based models for trapping wildlife while minimizing animal suffering.

In reality, the program legitimizes standard leghold traps (and other controversial devices) to ensure that steel-jaw traps can continue to be used and that trade with European countries is not disrupted. The program involves paying fur trappers with taxpayer dollars to participate and trap furbearing species as part of a testing program. BMPs neither protect animals nor eliminate the need for regulations mandating humane wildlife management practices—for example, unmodified steel-jaw leghold traps are included in the list of traps that meet BMP criteria. AFWA provides BMPs for 19 individual mammalian species found in the United States—including the federally protected Canada lynx—and nearly all of these guidelines endorse the use of steel-jaw leghold traps. Also, even though BMPs designate specific traps approved for catching a specific species, the BMPs don’t assess the ability of the trap to selectively trap the species for which it is approved, thereby adding to the farce.

Although federal funds have been used to support the BMP research and development process, it has been undertaken with minimal transparency since the program was initiated 15 years ago. Animal welfare advocates and the public have been excluded from the BMP process, while trapping interests and associations have been given substantial influence. Lacking both scientific merit and enforceability, BMPs are thus little more than a public relations tool for the fur industry and a distraction from the suffering associated with steel-jaw leghold traps.

### Problems for Non-target Animals

Whether on land or in water, steel-jaw traps threaten both target and non-target species. The species most commonly captured in these brutal traps include raccoons, red foxes, coyotes, muskrats, beavers, minks, bobcats, and gray foxes, but the traps are notoriously non-selective, maiming and killing non-target animals such as birds, threatened and endangered species, and even companion animals.

Numerous studies have shown that non-target capture is a significant problem associated with the use of steel jaw traps. In fact, non-target animals can comprise a majority of those captured. Alarmingly, some states have sanctioned the take of non-target threatened species—such as Canada lynx in Maine—if they are taken “incidentally” to efforts to capture other furbearing animals. Even states that have established restrictions on the types of traps that may be used and the methods by which non-target animals are to be released have few means of evaluating and responding to the numbers of non-target animals trapped and thereby ensuring that non-target animals do not suffer the same fate as targeted species.

### Dispelling the Myths and Moving Forward

Because state wildlife departments receive revenues from the sale of trapping licenses, they are influenced by trapping interests, and have little incentive to proactively reform trapping.

This brutal practice continues because trapping is hidden from the public eye; most people are unaware it is even happening. As winter approaches and peak trapping seasons begin throughout the United States, AWI encourages individuals to exercise caution while outdoors—particularly with companion animals—and to inform friends, neighbors, communities and legislators about the substantial and unnecessary suffering that is caused each year by steel-jaw leghold traps in the United States.