

soundoff

A response to the trappers

Dear Editor:

I am writing to commend and thank you for introducing discussion about trapping in "The Brunswickan".

As distasteful as it may appear to your readers, it can be conservatively stated that most present types of traps (including snares), that can be legally used in New Brunswick, or potential instruments of torture. This situation will only be alleviated when it becomes illegal to use inhumane traps (i.e. those that can cause prolonged suffering), and when trappers are required by law to visit their traps at least daily, under normal circumstances (at present there are no stipulations). Further research and field testing of possible "humane" traps is also urgently required (the "Federal-Provincial Committee on Humane Trapping" was disbanded in 1981).

If more people realize what can happen to trapped animals in the wild, this could lead to much-needed reforms. It is unfortunate that many trappers appear to be extremely sensitive to public discussion of this subject--except on their own terms. This tends to cloud the issues that should be raised and inhibits objective discussion. An analogy may help in viewing this reaction. Many of us drive automobiles and realize that a faulty or poorly constructed vehicle, or one that is driven carelessly, can cause terrible suffering. Since responsibly-motivated drivers do not normally take personal exception to public criticisms of unsuitable vehicles of irresponsible drivers, it is easier to enact legislation to cope with the problem. In the trapping controversy, there is a great need to face the truth of the situation so that improvements can be instituted. Perhaps I can bring this to your attention most vividly by pointing out that many of the same traps that were used at the time of the founding of our nation can still be used in New Brunswick. The only present legal restrictions refer

to the diameter of snare wire that can be used at different periods of the trapping season, and the specific animals that can be legally trapped at different times of the year; it is also illegal to set snares to catch deer and moose, or to trap bears (people were being trapped by such activities). The trappers choice, then, will depend on his/her concern about the suffering that could be inflicted, his/her ingenuity in devising traps and setting them, and the types of traps that are available commercially.

One present method for trapping foxes involves suspending a three-pronged cod jig, baited with meat, from a tree limb. The fox leaps for the meat and becomes impaled on the sharp barbed hooks. Death can be caused by mutilation, exhaustion, starvation, or freezing. The Minister of Natural Resources stated last year that the government would move towards banning this particular device, but it is still legal at present. There has been no expression of intent to ban other traps such as the leghold and snare that can cause as much suffering. Why has it taken so long to move even this far, when there are precedents for stricter legislation elsewhere in Canada, the USA, and in other countries? I have copies of correspondence sent to the highest level of the N.B. government over 10 years ago expressing concern about the cruelty involved in trapping. In 1973, one reply to a concerned citizen stated: "You can be assured that New Brunswick is very interested in a more humane trapping industry, and your concern is shared by those in this Government who have the responsibility to improve the situation." A later reply to other correspondence, in 1983, stated: "Individuals differ in their views and feelings towards the taking of animals and these differences must be respected. Persons with an interest in this issue are committed to the principle of humaneness, or ethics as

you put it, and I assure you that government will work to further this principle". One can question very seriously how effectively this principle has been furthered. A letter from a New Brunswick M.L.A. in May, 1983, to a person living in B.C. stated: "I acknowledge receipt of your letter--concerning trapping methods in use in New Brunswick and Canada. My knowledge of the subject is nil, yours is the first letter and/or comment I have received on the top in 13 years of public life. I gather my caucus colleagues have not received many, if any, complaints as well because we have never discussed the issue in my time. However, I cannot speak for the government except to say I do not recall them ever raising the issue publicly."

I can speak from personal experience of the effects of the leghold trap and the snare. In 1969, our cat, Piebald, missing for a week on our Ontario farm, limped home dragging a leghold trap. Her festering lower leg had to be amputated. In late 1982, our dog Tina was caught in a snare laid by someone trapping on our property. The suffering and anguish that Tina and my wife and I endured convinced us of the cruelty of some trapping methods. Legislation to prevent trapping within 300 metres of dwellings was only established in New Brunswick at the end of 1983.

Perhaps you will let me provide indications of how some other people, including trappers, have reacted. My motive in including these details is not one of sensationalism, but to illustrate poignantly, that since animals in our countryside face terrible hazards and have virtually no exercisable rights to prevent them happening, we should know what we allow to occur in our midst.

Frank Conibear (with whom I have spoken at length about trapping), the inventor of the sometimes quick-killing Conibear trap, who trapped for 32 years and has written: "The next

trap has a mink. It is dead--died in the leghold trap. The pen we built has been knocked down, and there are teeth marks on all the sticks and branches within range. There are signs of a terrific struggle; from experience I know the mink lived about three or four days and then died of hunger and pain. The foot is lacerated, swollen and covered with blood. The stump of the leg above the trap is swollen four times its normal size, and frozen. The shoulder too is all blood-coloured sickly, gelatine-like substance, indicating the terrible suffering it has gone through before death has released it. The trap is slowly severing the last shreds of sinews and then, with escape only a few hours away, the mink died. It is stretched out as it threw itself in the last spasm, and frozen hard and stiff. The fur is fine and glossy; it will make some women a lovely neckpiece!" Frank Conibear has indicated to me that he doesn't think the use of offset jaws, rubber-cushioning, or stop-loss devices--all of which are old ideas--radically lessen the cruel aspects of the leghold trap.

Dr. Harry Lillie, a Scottish medical doctor, who visited traplines in Meadowlake, Saskatchewan (Testimony to U.S. Congressional hearings, 1975): "In the days ahead, out in the more open country, coyotes were found dead, after they had dragged traps attached to heavy anchor poles up to a mile or more. Searches ended so often with a whole paw in the jaws. Or, they would be tangled completely in a wire snare, after chewing every bit of tree bark around as they gradually strangled". "A vicious wold snare had cut into the neck of one. When close to suffocation the wire had perforated the windpipe. The rush of air into the lungs had brought a fresh burst of struggling that forced the wire right through the burst windpipe to the backbone, when a sudden bursting of a neck artery had ended the torture."

Mr. H. Lunn, a former director of the Humane Trap development Committee, Toronto, Ontario: "At best the animal is choked progressively to death and since this situation is at the dictates of fear and struggling by the animal itself, the period involved may be very prolonged".

The foregoing are the obvious injuries. Trappers often defend the leghold trap by claiming they can release non-target animals with no harm done. Katherine Durham, in a recent paper (Injuries to birds of prey caught in leghold traps. Int. J. Stud. Amin. Prob. 1(6)1981) has stated: "A far greater rate of crippling and mortality of raptors results from leghold trap injuries than might be expected based on initial examination of the bird at the time of capture.---Any raptor caught by a leghold trap in the course of furbearer trapping activities, especially one that has been in the trap overnight, should be considered seriously injured, regardless of how inconsequential the injury may appear". "Smaller padded or offsetjaws traps or leg snares are not acceptable, as they will also cause disruption of the vascular supply even though the incidence of fractures might be lower." Another study at Northern Michigan University showed that, of three coyotes which were radio-tagged and released after being caught in leghold traps, two were later found dead from starvation and their injuries. One coyote had chewed off its foot after release; the other coyote's foot was "badly torn and chewed, exposing broken bones." Yet these coyotes had appeared to be well enough to be released.

Some trappers have put leghold traps on their hands to try to publicly demonstrate that there are no adverse consequences. Cathy Liss, speaking for the Society for Animal Protection Legislation, in New

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