

# Trapping in the United States

## An HRC Research Primer



### Report in Brief

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This primer summarizes the available quantitative research about trapping land animals, primarily for fur or wildlife management purposes. The data provided here covers the size of the U.S. population of trappers as well as public attitudes toward trapping. This report also includes the available statistics regarding the types of traps used and the number of animals killed by trappers.

### The Bottom Line

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Trapping is a specific form of hunting animals that utilizes a mechanical device for catching and holding the target animal. Public opinion surveys that specifically address trapping are rare, but sentiment appears to be similar to attitudes toward hunting (see HRC primer, *Hunting in the United States*<sup>1</sup>). It appears that both the proportion of people engaged in trapping and the number of animals killed by licensed trappers are declining over time.

Trapping kills more than four million animals each year.<sup>2</sup> Many animals other than the “target animals” are also caught and killed in traps, including companion animals and endangered animals. The use of certain traps is perceived to be cruel by a majority of the population, causing some U.S. states to pass legislation banning such traps. Where no ban is in place, surveys tend to show support for a proposed ban on these types of traps.

### How to Use this Information

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Understanding support for and opposition to trapping provides animal advocates with the insight necessary to create more effective anti-trapping campaigns. This research should be examined in conjunction with the HRC research primer, *Hunting in the United States*<sup>3</sup>, for a more comprehensive analysis of public attitudes toward wildlife-related activities.

### HRC Information

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By phone: (206) 905-9887

By e-mail: [info@humaneresearch.org](mailto:info@humaneresearch.org)

Online: <http://www.humaneresearch.org>

By post: Post Office Box 6476, Olympia, WA 98507

## Introduction and Overview

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Trapping is a specific form of hunting where a mechanical device is used to capture an animal, often with the goal of minimizing damage to its fur. Trapping is most commonly used to kill animals for their fur, as a source of food, and for wildlife “management” purposes. For the latter, trapping is typically and ostensibly used to control predators that stalk certain endangered species or as “pest control” to limit the damage done by these animals to farms, ranches, or private property. In some cases, trapping may be used to obtain animals for research purposes or to relocate animals to different territories.

Public opinion data about trapping is limited, although attitudes appear to be aligned with public sentiment toward hunting (see the HRC research primer, *Hunting in the United States*<sup>4</sup>). There is much less support for trapping than there is for hunting. Survey data has consistently found that a majority of people supports hunting, whereas 50-65% of respondents in various surveys have indicated support for placing a ban on trapping. Laws regarding various aspects of trapping vary by state, including what traps may be used, when licenses are required, and what animal may be trapped. Born Free USA produces an annual “report card” outlining state laws that serves as a useful reference.<sup>5</sup>

Trapping data is most commonly collected by state wildlife departments, leading to an incomplete picture of the use of trapping nationally. However, it is clear that the number of animals killed by trapping is high, with estimates at about four million animals being killed by trapping each year.<sup>6</sup> The numbers of animals reported to state agencies by trappers are most likely understated, as traps unintentionally catch many non-target animals that are illegal to trap; thus these cases most likely go unreported. Born Free USA provides a database of animals who are unintentionally caught by traps.<sup>7</sup> The database relies on news reports and self-reports from people, so it is only a small fraction of actual incidents. However, the database paints an important picture of some of the problems associated with trapping, including injury and death for companion animals and excruciating deaths due to traps left unchecked.

## Type of Traps

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A variety of devices are used to trap animals, but the most frequently used (and often the most controversial) types of traps include the following:<sup>8</sup>

- **Leghold/foothold traps.** A common type of trap, this device consists of two spring-activated jaws that tightly grip an animal’s leg or foot to prevent escape. Traps are baited and generally hidden on land, although they are sometimes submerged in water. Animals are known to withstand serious injury from leghold traps, resulting in long periods of suffering. Based on concerns for animal welfare, foothold traps have been banned in several states.
- **Body gripping/conibear traps.** The purpose of a conibear trap is to kill the trapped animal quickly, although the mechanism is generally considered to be cruel. After being lured to the trap with bait, the jaws of the trap close around the animal’s neck and choke the animal to death.
- **Snares.** These are cables or nooses designed to restrain an animal by tightening around the neck or a limb. They are frequently used for animal population control and food collection. Snares are highly criticized on the basis of animal cruelty and the large proportion of non-target catches. They are regulated in many states and illegal in some jurisdictions.

### UTILIZATION OF TRAPS

Year	Source	Region	Findings
2011	New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife <sup>9</sup>	New Jersey	Trappers used the following types of traps: body grip/conibear traps (74%), cable restraints (63%), box traps (46%), diver traps (19%).
2009-2010	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources <sup>10</sup>	Wisconsin	The types of traps used: body grip/ conibear traps (38%), leghold /foothold (35%), cages (14%), enclosed trigger (6%) cable restraints (5%), snares (3%).

### Population of Trappers in the U.S.

Merritt Clifton compiled one of the only comprehensive profiles of trappers in 1987.<sup>11</sup> His findings showed that trappers are generally Caucasian men; they are typically non-farming rural residents of the Northern Midwest and have a high school education. About three-fourths of all North American trappers fit this profile; specifically, 93% of trappers are male and 95% are Caucasian. Native trappers are estimated to be less than 6% of Canadian trappers and less than 1% of U.S. trappers. In the U.S. and Canada, approximately one-quarter (26%) are under 25 years of age, a similar proportion is between 26 and 54, and 47% are age 55 or older. Many of these national level findings are supported by recent local findings in the State of New Jersey where, in 2011, 98% of trappers were men and 47% were aged 50 or older.<sup>12</sup>

### POPULATION ESTIMATES OF TRAPPERS

Year	Source	Region	Findings
2011	New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife <sup>13</sup>	New Jersey	1,050 trapping licenses were sold in 2011. 65% of license holders actively trapped in 2011. Less than 1% of licenses were sold to non-residents, and 4% were sold to trappers age 16 or younger.
2010	Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks <sup>14</sup>	Montana	4,029 licenses were issued in 2010. 46% of license holders (1,866 trappers) actively trapped in 2010.
2008	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources <sup>15</sup>	Minnesota	7,167 trapper licenses were sold during the 2007-2008 season.
2007-2008	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources <sup>16</sup>	Wisconsin	Of those who purchased a resident trapping license or conservation patron license, 53% actively trapped during the 2007-2008 season, totaling 9,468 active trappers.
2004	Animal Protection of New Mexico <sup>17</sup>	New Mexico	767 trappers were identified during the season and 95% of trappers were residents.

## Animals Killed by Trappers

The availability of trapping data varies from region to region and much of it relies on self-reported data from the trappers themselves. Some of the most comprehensive regional statistics available have been compiled online by Born Free USA, but no information is available beyond 2004.<sup>18</sup> The USDA keeps information on the animals killed by the federal government, although they do not provide details of the methods they use. Individually published statistics are only rarely available for specific dates and states, but these and the available USDA national data are summarized in the following table:

### ANIMALS KILLED BY TRAPPERS

Year	Source	Region	Findings
2010-2011	Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife <sup>19</sup>	Oregon	Total animals trapped by season: 2010-2011: 23,439
2008-2011	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources <sup>20</sup>	Minnesota	Total animals trapped by season: 2008-2009: 259,472 2009-2010: 229,049 2010-2011: 331,259
2009-2011	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources <sup>21</sup>	Wisconsin	Total animals trapped by season: 2009-2010: 461,218 2010-2011: 517,385
2011	United States Department of Agriculture Wildlife Service <sup>22</sup>	United States	Total animals killed by Wildlife Services:* Badgers: 537 Black Bears: 616 Bobcats: 1,270 Coyotes: 83,242 Arctic Foxes: 102 Gray Foxes: 2,543 Kit Foxes: 25 Red Foxes: 2,233 Swift Foxes: 27 Mountain Lions: 405 Wolves: 365
2008-2010	Montana Fish and Wildlife <sup>23</sup>	Montana	Total animals trapped by season: 2010: 45,902 2009: 39,808 2008: 42,569
2010	Michigan Department of Natural Resources <sup>24</sup>	Michigan	The total animals trapped by season: 2009: 311,256 2010: 348,624
2009	Statistics Canada <sup>25</sup>	Canada	Total animals trapped: 2009: 730,915

\* The methods used by Wildlife Services are unspecified, but include trapping.

## Public Attitudes toward Trapping

The availability of public opinion surveys specifically addressing trapping is somewhat limited, although a few studies have been conducted regarding public support for legislation banning the use of certain traps. These surveys consistently show that the majority of respondents favor a ban on the use of traps and, in particular, respondents seem to favor a ban on the use of the controversial steel-jawed leghold trap. The reasons for supporting such a ban most commonly relate to concerns about animal cruelty. Based on the findings of these surveys, it is clear that public opinion of trapping has changed in recent years and that support for trapping seems to be eroding.

Earlier surveys consistently show lower levels of support for trapping bans compared with those conducted more recently. However, there is evidence of greater acceptance of trapping as a method of wildlife management among wildlife and fisheries conservation professionals, when compared with members of the general public. A 2006 survey of such wildlife professionals found that a smaller (but still substantial) 46% of those respondents favored a ban on the use of leghold traps, compared with the 50-65% levels found among members of the public in other surveys.<sup>26</sup>

### PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR OR OPPOSITION TO TRAPPING

Year	Source	Region	Findings
2006	Wildlife Society <sup>27</sup>	United States	Among wildlife and fisheries conservation professionals, 46% favored a ban on the use leghold traps, while 39% opposed such a ban and 15% had no opinion. Those who favored a ban believe they cause unnecessary pain/stress, may harm non-targeted animals, and are an unnecessary management tool.
2004	Animal Protection of New Mexico <sup>28</sup>	New Mexico	63% support (41% strongly, 22% somewhat) a ban on leg-hold, snare, and lethal traps on public lands. 22% are opposed to a ban on trapping. Females, "Anglo" voters, and those who participate in outdoor activities are more likely to support a ban on trapping.
1999	Colorado State University <sup>29</sup>	Colorado	61% of respondents would vote to ban trapping in the state of Colorado.
1998	Bowdoin College <sup>30</sup>	Maine	51% agreed (34% strongly, 17% somewhat) that "trapping is a part of Maine's outdoors heritage and should continue." 39% disagreed (23% strongly, 16% somewhat) and 10% did not know.
1998	Zogby <sup>31</sup>	United States	62% of those in the U.S. would support a ban on trapping while 25% would oppose. Those in support include 54% of Republicans and 59% of men. 66% of those in the U.S. feel that trapping is cruel, while 20% feel that trapping is a quick and painless way to kill the animals.

## **Conclusion**

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Although the number of animals killed by trapping seems to be decreasing slightly each year, the picture is incomplete due to a lack of consistent data released by each state. What is known is that millions of animals die due to traps each year for their fur, for “management” purposes, for food, or simply by mistake. Trapping as an activity is limited to a specific demographic segment of the population—mostly older Caucasian men. Trapping is seen as cruel by many people and public opinion surveys show that most people will support legislation banning the practice, making it an issue that animal advocates might have success marginalizing and eventually eliminating.

## References

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- <sup>4</sup> HRC, 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> Born Free USA. 2010. "State Trapping Report Card." Last accessed December 27, 2012. [http://www.bornfreeusa.org/downloads/pdf/BFUSA\\_State\\_Trapping\\_Report\\_Card\\_2010.pdf](http://www.bornfreeusa.org/downloads/pdf/BFUSA_State_Trapping_Report_Card_2010.pdf)
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