

Trapped in Suffering: The Cruelty and Alternatives to Steel-Jawed Leghold Traps

The birds are singing as snow settles softly onto the forest floor—a picturesque scene enhanced by the red fox scurrying through the trees in pursuit of prey. His movements are swift and sure as he trots across the newly fallen snow. Then, after one unlucky step, a steel contraction suddenly clamps upon the fox's leg, shackling him to the spot. Thus the peace of a still winter's day is broken by the slamming of yet another steel-jawed leghold trap. This device is a spring-activated trap which clamps shut when an animal steps into it. This crude design has barely been altered since its introduction almost 300 years ago, and while the trap hasn't changed, society's views of animal welfare has. These archaic traps have garnered extensive popularity amongst trappers, as they are the easiest to set up and operate, the least expensive, and allegedly the most effective. While these arguments are valid, animal welfare should not be sacrificed for convenience and lower prices. Even the "padded" leghold trap is deemed inhumane; two small strips of rubber are placed on both jaws of the trap, but the basic principle is still the same. Countless voices in animal welfare groups proclaim that "leghold traps inflict unnecessary pain and anxiety on animals, both physically and mentally." (Corn, 1993) Steel-jawed leghold traps are inhumane methods of capturing animals or controlling populations; however, there are effective alternatives available to wildlife agencies, pest control, and commercial trappers that eliminate or lessen animal suffering.

The fox in the example above is just one of species affected by the leghold trap: bobcat, wolf, raccoon, lynx, beaver, muskrat, mink, and many other fur-bearing mammals have fallen victim to the traps (Garrett, 1999, p.10-23). When the animal steps into the trap, it springs closed and locks one of the animal's limbs between its jaws, which may fracture or otherwise injure the appendage. A further serious danger is trapper negligence. If traps go unchecked for days, animals are subject to dehydration, hypothermia, and predation sometimes leading to the animal's death before the trapper's

return. Yet even when the traps are checked regularly, animals “undergo an unacceptable amount of suffering.” (Corn, 1993) Animals will struggle for hours or days in traps, gnawing at the steel device until, in some cases, they break their teeth. In a final act of desperation, trapped animals have been known to chew off their limb in order to escape—a gruesome habit known as “wringing off”. That an animal would be driven to sever its own limb to break free illustrates the extreme pain and stress inflicted by these leghold traps. This is the epitome of our inhumane treatment of wild creatures. Underwater leghold traps, set for mammals like beaver and muskrat, are also cruel. The trap springs shut while the animal is underwater, preventing it from swimming to the surface for air. After many agonizing minutes of violent struggling and thrashing, the animal loses consciousness and slowly drowns. These types of trauma are all the worse for non-target species as well, which some trappers will simply release in their injured condition. The weakened animals will likely have a difficult time facing the risks posed to them by their environment. Among the non-target animals victimized by the leghold traps are beloved household pets, which can be crippled, mutilated, or killed by accidental trapping.

By far the most condemned use of leghold traps is the commercial trapping of fur-bearing mammals. The fur industry has attracted a myriad of public outcries against their cruel trapping methods; “you should be ashamed to wear fur,” a video propagated by one such organization admonishes viewers. (Crying Shame-Trapping Cruelty) While trapping does serve as a source of livelihood, for some individuals in our society, it acts as a mere hobby. Is it justifiable to trap animals for recreation? Fur-trapping needn’t be done away with completely, but it should be severely restricted to “professional” trappers only, and strictly regulated to eliminate leghold traps. There are many alternatives the trappers can use instead of the leghold trap: cage traps, box traps, and log box traps have proven to be humane and reasonably effective. The innovative log box trap is made mostly

with organic materials collected at the trap site, save for a heavy lid that is propped open by a rudimentary lever. When the animal enters the trap and pulls at the dangling bait, which is connected to the trigger, the lid slams shut. (Garrett, 1999, p.7-8) Although it is more expensive than other traps, it is the most effective alternative trap with minimal stress to the animal. The trapped animals are provided with ample shelter and most remain relatively calm and relaxed. A study on wolverines showed the same 12 animals being trapped a total of 37 times, proving that “the boxes [were] not sufficiently unpleasant [that they] developed an aversion to them” and instead found the wolverines going back again and again for bait. (Garrett, 1999, p.8) The biggest drawback to log-box traps is that they can be used only for permanent traplines: due to their size and composition, they cannot be easily transported to other locations.

Presently, wildlife damage control agencies employ cage, box, or leghold traps to deal with nuisance animals; sadly, the leghold traps are used with the most frequency despite the available alternatives. The cage trap is made from wire mesh, has a hinged door that swings shut when the animal steps inside and activates the trigger, and often is collapsible for easy transport. Box traps are made of either steel or aluminum and usually used to catch small mammals susceptible to hypothermia. Also, when bedding is added to the interior, the animals may chew at it to create a nest, which they will nestle into with an astounding degree of calmness. (Garrett, 1999, p.7) Meanwhile, the Animal Damage Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture permits the continued use of leghold traps for nuisance animal control in order to protect livestock and cropland. Along with the cage and box traps, there are several non-trapping methods that may be implemented as well. Methods such as electric fencing and guard dogs are advocated for their humane treatment of predators with minimal losses of livestock. Loud noisemaking devices also may be used to startle the predators away. (Corn, 1993)

Federal wildlife agencies are also users of leghold traps, and employ them extensively when conducting predator management programs. One such example is the extermination of the red fox in California to protect the threatened California Clapper Rail, whose numbers have been reduced by the nonnative fox. (Dove, 2000) Though it is clear the biologists cannot sit idly while the clapper rail population diminishes, it is even more clear that leghold traps are not the answer. In a situation like this one, biologists are justified in trapping the predators, as long as use humane methods. Along with trapping, they should also try to reduce factors, such as shrinking habitat size and human encroachment, as well as than predator eradication. To keep the predator population manageable, cage traps and box traps are suitable alternatives to leghold traps. For larger animals, birth control may successfully limit population growth as well.

A worthwhile investment would be to gather engineering students and propose a contest to develop an effective, humane, and mobile trap. The best designs produced could be passed along to biology students who have more knowledge of animals and their behavior. They could then collaborate with the trappers who would actually be using the traps, which would produce a common ground where people on both sides of the issue could see eye-to-eye. A similar contest was held to devise an alternative warm-water source for endangered manatees, and it generated valuable ideas that were further investigated. At the end of the contest, the best designs could then be built and tested, before being manufactured at a larger scale. This would provide a desirable alternative that both animal welfare groups and trappers could approve.

The underlining theme through spectrum of trapping purposes is that, if an animal needs to be caught, steel-jawed leghold traps should not be used. In any context, no matter the benefits or convenience, the traps cause immense suffering that could be avoided by means of humane traps or alternative methods. Animal welfare cannot be compromised. If we revisit the red fox trapped on the

otherwise peaceful winter day, we can now fully understand the misery he may undergo. Will the trapper return before the fox is exposed to a chilling winter night? How far will the fox go in his desperation to break free? If he manages to “wring off”, will he be able to survive with the injuries inflicted from the trap? This creature’s fate, and countless others’, lies with those who can speak up and make a difference, as long as we don’t simply look the other way.

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