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The Public Can't Bear the Costs of Not Trapping

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Editor's Call

by Paul Wait

It's no secret that hunters and trappers contribute a staggering amount of money to the economy. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, hunters and trappers paid $847 million in 2002 for license fees and excise taxes. In addition, hunters and trappers spent an estimated $5.2 billion for food, lodging and travel related to animal pursuits.

If trapping and hunting were outlawed, more than $6 billion in revenue would disappear annually. $6 billion!

But that incomprehensible sum is just a portion of the economic loss the United States would suffer if people were no longer able to hunt and trap.

A recently published 49-page report produced by the Animal Use Issues Committee of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies outlines the potential costs of losing hunting and trapping as management tools.

The authors gathered information from dozens of states and Canadian provinces to assess wildlife damage and animal population trends.

"Communities across the country are finding out that wildlife management is a complex science," the report states. "Even those who have questioned hunting and trapping in the past are now encouraging hunters and trappers to help control certain wildlife species. They have found that by eliminating proven wildlife management practices through ballot boxes and 'bumper sticker' management, unforeseen negative consequences can follow.

"Unfortunately, many well-meaning people are still trying to pass laws limiting wildlife managers' ability to use hunting and trapping as a means to manage wildlife. But who pays the price? Wildlife, native habitats, farmers, homeowners, families, communities, insurance companies/premiums are all affected when these management tools are lost."

With an ever-increasing human population encroaching on a shrinking rural landscape, hunting and trapping are playing a more critical role than ever in managing wildlife.

"When wildlife populations reach their cultural and natural carrying capacity, hunting becomes even more important," the report asserts.

"However, wildlife managers don't see hunting and trapping as their only tools to reduce human/wildlife conflicts.

"One of the first tools managers use is to help people learn about wildlife and how to live with wildlife in harmony. But harmony only goes so far. When the density of a particular species of wildlife such as deer, elk, moose, bear or beaver exceeds their carrying capacity (the environment's ability to sustain them or the public's tolerance to welcome them) trouble begins."

Most wildlife-control specialists make a significant portion of their living dealing with customers who moved to the country or lakefront property after living in urban areas for most of their lives. City-dwellers who escape the concrete jungle often buy or build homes in the middle of excellent wildlife habitat. And these people are far less tolerant of wildlife than people raised in small towns and in the country.

"A survey of state fish and wildlife agencies in 2004 indicated that, over the last five years, nuisance wildlife complaints across the country have increased over 20 percent for deer, beaver and bear, yet populations of those same species have increased just over 11 percent," according to the study.

"Part of the reason is that wildlife habitat, such as natural areas, forest and farmlands, is increasingly lost to development. Excess populations of wildlife have nowhere else to live but in our backyards, setting the stage for conflicts."

So what if hunting and trapping were banned tomorrow?

Vehicle collisions with animals already cause more than 26,000 injuries and 200 deaths per year, and the property damage bill is $1.2 billion for deer collisions alone.

Based on an IAFWA survey, deer damage levels would increase 218 percent if hunting is lost as a management tool. The resulting injury toll could jump by 50,000 people, with three times as many fatalities. Vehicle damage totals could hit $3.8 billion.

But the deer/auto accident quandary is just one aspect of wildlife management. Consider the role trapping plays in reducing rabies.

"According to the General Accounting Office, cases of rabies among fox, coyote and raccoon (the report doesn't mention skunks) are increasing, with associated costs estimated over $450 million annually for health care, education, vaccinations and animal control. Trapping is often the only way to manage populations of these wary, primarily nocturnal animals. State wildlife agencies estimate that in the absence of hunting and trapping, wildlife damages would increase 221 percent. This translates into a potential increase of $995 million in health care and control costs — or $1.44 billion annually."

And then there's my favorite rodent.

Beaver populations have increased by an estimated 6.8 percent in the United States during the past five years. The Northeast flattail population has grown the most — 11 percent — which makes sense, given the trap restrictions in Massachusetts.

"If trapping was lost as a wildlife management tool, states would face demands to remove problem animals and control beaver populations. As of 2004, the typical cost to remove a problematic beaver was $75 to $150, based on estimates from Massachusetts. No one knows how many beaver will have to be annually removed by wildlife agencies if public trapping were no longer permitted, but 50 percent of current harvest levels is regarded as a reasonable, conservative estimate by the IAFWA. Therefore, state and local governments might be required to handle 214,500 beavers each year, at a cost of $16.1 million to $32.2 million of taxpayer dollars annually."

Because most state and federal budgets are being throttled, fish and game personnel could not be expected to deal with beavers in every pond, which is the likely outcome if trapping is eliminated as a management tool.

"Government programs are not likely to fill the void left by a loss of trapping," the report states. "Much of the additional work would fall to private-sector wildlife control companies. The bottom line would be the same — people will experience greater levels of wildlife damage and personally bear the burden of higher costs."

The report also estimates that government agencies would have to spend $132 million to $265 million to provide the same wildlife population controls trappers now perform if trapping was outlawed.

In addition, damage to crops and livestock would increase by $3.02 billion if hunting and trapping ceased, not to mention $1 billion per year in landowner income from lost hunting leases and fees.

And damage to homes by animals such as raccoons and squirrels would increase by $972 million per year.

So despite how little your fur buyer offers the next time you show up with your hard-earned raccoon hides and beaver pelts, be proud. You are part of a very important lot.