

CONSERVATION BRIEF



# Regulated Trapping and the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation





*“The Wildlife and its habitat cannot speak. So we must and we will.”*

**THEODORE ROOSEVELT**

*Conservationist, naturalist, historian,  
and 26th president of the United States*

# Regulated Trapping and the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation

**The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is a set of accepted legal and philosophical principles that, collectively applied, has distinguished wildlife conservation and management in the United States and Canada from other, less successful forms worldwide.**

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The model evolved and developed over time and out of necessity to reverse the negative effects of habitat changes and unregulated over-harvesting of many species of wildlife and the fateful attitude that resources were inexhaustible. The principles embodied in the model have guided how natural resources are managed under sustainable use principles for the betterment of wildlife and people. The model's principles are the reason why we still have abundant wildlife populations in the U.S. and Canada and the opportunity to enjoy them. Hunters, trappers, anglers and other sportsmen and women helped to establish, popularize, mobilize support for, and/or defend each of these guiding principles over the past 130 years. The use of modern regulated trapping in wildlife conservation and management fits squarely within this model, and this brief examines each tenet to see how trapping fits within it.

## **Wildlife resources are a public trust.**

The wildlife of North America belongs to its citizens; Trustees (elected and appointed officials) are responsible for trust oversight, and trust managers (professionals that staff natural resource agencies) manage the trust for the benefit of citizens.

Fish and Wildlife agencies have done a stellar job of managing and recovering many species of wildlife including some furbearers (river otter, wolf beaver, fisher, marten) that were on the brink of extinction due to unregulated harvests and habitat loss. Since regulated management of trapping began, trapping has not caused any species to become endangered. In fact, even with regulated harvests occurring, most furbearer populations are abundant, and some are more abundant than they ever have been in recorded history.

Iconic indigenous wildlife like the river otter, bobcat, gray wolf, beaver, raccoon, and many other furbearer species are thriving due to the diligent efforts of the government agencies that manage these species as a public trust. Neither the harvest nor the commercial trade for these species threaten these populations.

The Public Trust Doctrine allows for a wide range of concurrent uses of wildlife resources including consumptive and non-consumptive uses. However, both uses are legitimate under this model and need not be mutually exclusive. Permitting a regulated trapping harvest does not equal depriving other citizens of their ability to access and enjoy wildlife because populations are sustainably managed. Other tenets address "allocation by law" and the "democracy of hunting" to ensure that all interests in wildlife as public resources are considered.

## Markets for game are eliminated.

Laws were passed to stop "market hunting" as long ago as the 1840s because some wildlife populations were being decimated by unregulated harvests. Overharvesting occurred because the meat from wildlife was being sold in "markets" to feed growing urban populations. Unregulated fur trapping, to meet market demands for hats, coats and mittens was also causing dramatic declines in some furbearers between 1690 and 1900. But modern regulated trapping and the management of furbearers operates very differently than the economically driven system that imperiled some species. The fur trade no longer exploits populations or causes them to become endangered, but rather, the highly regulated harvest of furbearers helps agencies maintain sustainable populations of furbearers within social carrying capacity.

The key is regulation; unregulated harvests have been brought to an end and current markets are highly regulated and serve a conservation purpose. Regulations ensure that harvests are consistent with sustainable-use principles, help manage conflicts between furbearers and humans, and foster support for habitat conservation. There is very little chance that modern science-based wildlife management will allow long term declines in populations to occur as a result of

harvest. By managing season timing and length, bag limits, harvest methods and other aspects of trapping, agencies are able to ensure the long-term viability of furbearer populations that markets once threatened. Sociocultural studies have shown that the majority of trappers today participate in trapping, not for economic gain, but because the activity is a part of their lifestyle, and because of the interaction with nature and wild places trapping permits. In fact, fur trapping generates very little money for the individual trapper (~\$1,700/year). Studies have shown that ~80% of trappers say that the income is not at all important (Responsive Management 2015).

## Wildlife can be killed only for a legitimate purpose.

Wildlife can be killed for legitimate purposes under strict guidelines for food and fur, in self-defense, or property protection. Laws are in place to restrict casual killing, wasting of harvested animals, and mistreating wildlife. Furbearers are trapped and killed for numerous legitimate purposes (Boggess et al., 1990; White et al., 2015) including maintaining populations within the social carrying capacity, to protect property, human health and safety, and to protect many endangered species and habitats like sea turtles, Atlantic Puffins and Whooping Cranes (Organ et al., 2016). The point is trapping will always occur even without utilizing the fur. Without the fur trade, harvested furbearing animals will be disposed of and wasted, rather than producing a durable, beautiful, environmentally friendly product that can be used by people. In other countries where the fur trade has been banned, like the European Union, millions of muskrats and hundreds of thousands of foxes are killed by trapping each year to protect human health, safety and property but these animals are simply killed and

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# THE NORTH AMERICAN MODEL OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

## WILDLIFE RESOURCES ARE A PUBLIC TRUST.

Wildlife is owned by government (State and federal) to be held in trust for the benefit of current and future generations of Americans.

## MARKETS FOR GAME ARE ELIMINATED.

Unregulated markets for game animals led to disastrous declines in many species.

## WILDLIFE CAN BE KILLED ONLY FOR A LEGITIMATE PURPOSE.

Wildlife can be killed for food and fur, in self-defense, or property protection. Laws restrict casual killing and mistreating wildlife.

## ALLOCATION OF WILDLIFE IS BY LAW.

Wildlife is not allocated by special privilege, such as birthright of land ownership; allocation is by law created by elected officials.

## WILDLIFE IS CONSIDERED AN INTERNATIONAL RESOURCE.

Wildlife and fish migrate between states, provinces, and countries. One nation's must not harm another's resources.

## SCIENCE IS THE PROPER TOOL TO DISCHARGE POLICY.

The best science available should be used as the basis for implementing policies focused on wildlife management.

## DEMOCRACY OF HUNTING IS STANDARD.

Every citizen in good standing has the freedom to participate in the harvest of wildlife.

their bodies are buried or incinerated. This is a shameful waste. Regulated trapping, and the fur trade allows for the legitimate and responsible use of wildlife — wildlife that will be considered a valuable resource to be perpetuated, rather than a pest to be eliminated when they become inconvenient regardless of whether they have dependent young or the time of year.

## **Allocation of wildlife is by law.**

Access to wildlife has been an inherent part of the North American experience, unlike many other nations where access is reserved for those with special privilege (e.g., aristocracy). Wildlife is allocated to the public by law, as opposed to market principles, land ownership, or other status. Democratic processes and public input into law-making help ensure access is equitable (Organ et al., 2012). Allocation of wildlife by law began in North America among western cultures when a law was passed in 1646 in Portsmouth, Rhode Island prohibiting the taking of white-tailed deer during certain times of year (creating a season for lawful take) because of alarming declines in abundance.

Eventually state wildlife agencies, game commissions, hunting organizations and federal conservation agencies were developed to manage wildlife. Countless laws surround the taking of wildlife today. This is especially true with the take of furbearers, in fact, there are likely more laws surrounding the take of the furbearers than any other group of species. Agencies often regulate the types of devices that may be used, where devices may be set, seasons when animals may be harvested (which may vary among species), bag limits and quotas, reporting criteria for harvests, and other details.

These measures are all taken to manage furbearers for various benefits to themselves, other species of wildlife, habitats, humans and to ensure that allocation is by law.

## **Wildlife is considered an international resource.**

Because wildlife and fish freely migrate across boundaries between states, provinces, and countries they are considered an international resource. The Migratory Bird Treaty of 1916, the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar bears, and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) are some examples of international wildlife conservation designed to prevent one nation's mismanagement to negatively affect another's resources.

## **Science is the proper tool to discharge policy.**

Decisions made by wildlife trustees should consider the best available biological and social science. Petitions, ballot initiatives, and other special interest campaigns typically are driven by agenda, not science. Science is a critical part of furbearer management, as the trust managers in wildlife agencies are science-trained professionals. Research and investigations into the ecology of animals forms the basis for many regulations. Seasons ensure that animals are not harvested when they have dependent young to care for. Efforts like the BMP program (White et al., 2021) that develop and inform trapping methods to ensure animals are trapped humanely and selectively are grounded in years of research.

Trapping assists wildlife managers in many ways. Harvest reporting, use of carcasses to study health, and other information can be used to understand population dynamics, all vital information for the management of a species. Research on muskrats in the 1930s and 1940s by Paul Errington, leader of the first Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit in the nation, showed how trapping harvest in the fall could compensate for natural winter mortality (the proportion of muskrats in the population that would die over winter, if removed in the fall, would lead to greater survival of the rest of the population, and the net result would be the same in the spring). This theory of compensatory harvest mortality has become a science-based approach to sustainable use of wildlife.

## **Democracy of hunting is standard.**

Trapping is simply a form of hunting and every citizen in good standing has the freedom to participate in the harvest of wildlife. However, participation in trapping may require one to obtain a trapping license or pass a trapper education course. Theodore Roosevelt and Aldo Leopold wrote that “democracy of sport” distinguished the United States and Canada from other nations where only the aristocracy could hunt. Joseph Sax, the pre-eminent scholar of the public trust, states that natural uses peculiar to a resource, such as hunting and trapping, are a hallmark of public trust in action. He said that the free availability of such uses marks a nation as one of citizens rather than serfs.

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public, furbearer trappers, and hunters, are a minority group, but their opportunities to access wildlife that is allocated by law should be protected if we are truly a free people.

Those who trap have a vested interest, perhaps more than any others, in the perpetuation of furbearer species. The public who trap are on the front line and often are the first to notify wildlife agencies of instances of pollution or other negative impacts on wildlife. They represent an important part of the management regime that is a part of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation designed to ensure the perpetuation of furbearers and other wildlife.

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Members of the public can not just go to the outdoors and harvest an animal. Legal trapping is highly regulated by wildlife agencies, requires a license, and trapping laws are enforced by specially trained wildlife law officers. Cover photo and above courtesy of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources