

Wildlife Conservation Depends on Regulated Trapping

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Wildlife conservation is complicated. In Vermont, that complexity is front and center in recent conversations around regulated trapping. Although this topic deserves Vermonters' careful consideration, I worry that some are losing sight of the conservation benefits that regulated trapping provides.

I am Vermont's new state furbearer biologist. I earned my master's degree in biology at Arkansas State University, and I have worked on complex conservation issues across the country, most recently with wolves in Oregon. In each case I have seen knee-jerk reactions overshadow the nuances of effective conservation, often to the detriment of wildlife. I see the same trend playing out, again, as Vermonters argue about trapping without seeing the full picture.

I want to be clear: even if it seems counterintuitive, regulated trapping is a critical wildlife management tool that benefits furbearer populations.

Vermont is at the cutting edge of furbearer conservation. Species like bobcat, mink, and Eastern coyote thrive on this landscape, and populations of every species that is trapped in our state are healthy and abundant. Vermont owes much of that conservation success to data collected during our regulated trapping seasons.

Vermont's trappers are part of a community science system. Samples from our regulated trapping seasons contribute to one of the country's longest running datasets on furbearers, helping state biologists identify potential threats to both wildlife and humans. We analyze tissue from fishers and bobcats for potential exposure to rodenticides. We track rabies distribution to measure spread on the landscape and evaluate the success of ongoing control efforts with our partners at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services. And our collaborators at the University of Vermont use genetic samples from fisher, bobcat, coyote, and fox to map furbearer movements across the landscape and to look at the spread of Covid (CoV2) in wildlife populations.

As we consider the role of regulated trapping in Vermont, it is important to understand that there is no alternative way to gather these valuable samples for research and monitoring.

Wildlife cameras cannot collect tissue. And furbearers trapped by professionals for damage or nuisance reasons would not provide a comparably large or diverse sample to that generated during our regulated trapping seasons. Without regulated trapping, state biologists and our conservation partners would lose our ability to gather sex, age, and distribution data that are essential for monitoring species like bobcats and otters. We would also lose the ability to detect and respond to emerging wildlife diseases, environmental toxins, and habitat loss.

Regulated trapping provides social benefits, too. Many of Vermont's wildlife conflicts are addressed during our regulated trapping seasons. The animals taken are utilized for food and fur. The costs, labor, and rewards of coexisting on a landscape with furbearers are shared by our neighbors.

So, what could it look like for Vermont communities if regulated trapping was outlawed, and nuisance control trapping was outsourced to businesses?

When regulated trapping was banned in Massachusetts in 1996, [the beaver population doubled](#). Public support for beaver and the valuable wetlands they create declined. The cost for dealing with human/beaver conflicts increased dramatically. Towns and highway departments faced bills from \$4,000 to \$21,000 per year from 1998-2002 to deal with human/beaver conflicts. Individual landowners paid upwards of \$300 per beaver to have them trapped by nuisance animal control contractors. In many cases animals trapped as nuisances were not used for fur or food.

Of course, Vermonters need to weigh the scientific and social benefits of regulated trapping against understandable concerns about the safety of pets and the suffering of trapped animals.

Recognizing this, the Fish and Wildlife Department is [developing new trapping regulations](#) at the direction of the legislature. In 2022, we worked with a diverse group of stakeholders and drew from [peer-reviewed research](#) to identify ways to make trapping safer and more humane. This spring, we will invite public comment on proposed regulations to: limit legal trap types in Vermont to the most humane standards based on peer-reviewed research; protect birds of prey and pets from being attracted to baited traps; and create a 25 ft – 50 ft. safety buffer between public roads, trails on most state lands, and the places where most traps can be set. Once finalized, these regulations should go into effect in 2024.

We believe that stronger regulations to reduce risks are in line with public opinion. 60 percent of Vermonters supported regulated trapping in a [statistically representative state-wide survey](#) last fall. And although Vermonters' opinions vary regarding different reasons people may trap, 60 percent also supported the right of others to trap regardless of their personal approval of trapping.

As Vermonters consider regulated trapping's role on our landscape, it is crucial to understand the complexity of the conservation challenges at hand—and the practical solutions the Fish and Wildlife Department is working towards.
