

From the Animal Welfare Institute "Quarterly":

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The Truth Behind Trapping

Wildlife consultant Camilla Fox interviews Bill Randall, a former Maine trapper.

Camilla: Can you please tell us about your history in regards to trapping?

Bill: My father was a novice beaver and muskrat trapper in the 1940s, and I often went with him to set and check traps. Seeing my father chopping through the ice and pulling a beaver up through the hole was as thrilling to me as catching a fish or shooting a deer, which I also did as a young boy. A side benefit of trapping that I quickly learned was the monetary rewards from selling the pelts to Sears and Roebuck. As a 10-year-old, I was absolutely thrilled to receive my first check in the mail for a dozen or so muskrats and a mink. In my adult life, as a novice and sportsman, I continued to trap furbearers into the 1980s—right up until the fur market crash.



Companion animals are frequently accidental victims of bone-crushing steel jaw leghold traps. The indiscriminate device also poses a risk to non-target wildlife species.

I was also a licensed fur buyer in the 1970s and 80s and often had discussions in my fur shop with other trappers about the unintended cruelty of our traps. At times, certain trappers who had developed a trust with me talked about the cats and dogs they caught and how they disposed of them. In my last year of land trapping and the only year that I trapped on land in a built up area, I caught 28 house cats and several dogs. I did not kill the dogs, but I did kill 26 of the cats. I did this upon the oral advice of the local game warden and the Maine Trapper's Association representative.

Most cats caught in a steel jaw leghold trap struggle so hard they further injure themselves—often severely, with broken legs and shoulders. Then, just as it still is today, the unwritten word among the

trappers and some game wardens was that if you released the cats, the owners would know they had been in a trap. The owners would take their beloved pet to a veterinarian and the injured cat would then appear on the front page of the local newspaper, causing bad publicity for trappers and trapping. As trappers, when we were sometimes asked about missing cats, we were advised to say that fishers killed them—in much the same way that the coyote is nearly always vilified and blamed today for the disappearance of someone's cat.

Camilla: Can you tell us about what you saw in the field during your trapping days that perhaps led to your decision to stop trapping?

Bill: Like every trapper who has trapped for a few years, I have seen about everything one can imagine could happen to an animal caught in a trap. I also learned as a young boy, and later as an adult, that traps are not selective. Spring muskrat trapping was abolished for precisely that reason. Just as other muskrat trappers did, I also caught dozens of ducks, numerous blue herons and meadow hens, several owls, and even a few pregnant female mink. It is not unusual to see just a muskrat's foot in a steel trap, even though we knew as trappers that muskrat and beaver traps must be set to ensure quick drowning. I've seen numerous skunks in my land traps that had chewed off a foot. I should mention that a foot

was all that was left in the only steel-jawed trap I ever set for a bear. This was in 1958; a year after the \$15 bounty was removed.

The thing that bothered me most was seeing a raccoon caught by the front foot in a steel trap that had somehow stripped off all of the skin up to his shoulder in the struggle to free himself. Nothing I saw actually caused me to stop trapping. In my later years, I have simply chosen to speak the truth about traps and trapping. Even though I don't trap anymore, it is the collectiveness of what I have seen over the years that causes me to continue to speak out.

Camilla: When more than 85 countries have banned the steel jaw leghold trap, do you think it is problematic that this trap is still legal in most US states, and still promoted by the US government?

Bill: As anyone who has been around government for any period of time knows, the government and its agents can be self-serving. Maine's wildlife managers are so entrenched in tradition that they continue to support hunting and trapping practices that are no longer needed or acceptable by today's ethical beliefs. Just as the federal government has sought to extirpate the coyotes by every means imaginable, cruel and otherwise, and at a cost of over \$50 million, Maine wildlife managers now use the coyote as their deer management scapegoat. And we must never forget that selling licenses is a monetary factor in their support of the status quo.

Camilla: When Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IF&W) conducted a state-sponsored coyote neck snaring program, you spoke out against this practice. Why did you choose to publicly condemn this practice, and why do you think coyote snaring is not acceptable?



Bill: I was given numerous photos of coyotes caught in snares by my best friend who is a trapper, and he saw nothing wrong about what he did. However, I remained silent, not wanting to

offend a friend—even though the photos were the most gory visual display of animal cruelty I had ever seen. But after reading the report by an IF&W biologist that 70 percent of the neck snared coyotes struggled for up to three days and died only after their brains exploded from blood abundance—something known as “jellyheads”—I had to speak out. I was also a friend of the former IF&W commissioner, a wildlife biologist, and he told me that the coyote snaring could have local benefits and should not be exercised on a state-wide basis. I believe that trying to extirpate the coyote is counterproductive over a cyclic period of time. IF&W charts conclusively prove that Mother Nature, coexisting with land management practices, is the ultimate manager of wildlife. Men, including our so-called wildlife managers, are merely short term meddlers.

Camilla: You are quoted in the Washington Post (May 20, 2007) as having been a bear trapper at one point in your life. Please tell us more about the change in your views on this issue and why you’d like to see an end to bear trapping in Maine.

Bill: In order to answer this question in full, I would have to write a book. My experiences are many and varied, as I have also been a recreational bear hunter with hounds, a bear baiting guide, and a bear trapping participant and advisor at various times for 45 years. I have participated in the trapping of approximately 50 bears, many of which we released. Releasing a bear from the trap always provided a greater thrill for me. If one has the ability to trap a mouse in their house, they can trap a bear. My views on bear hunting and trapping changed drastically after both activities became commercialized, following the IF&W declaration that Maine’s black bear is a big game animal.



While the cruelty of steel jaw leghold traps has been realized by Bill Randall and others, the tradition of trapping animals using this horrific device remains alive, as demonstrated by this trapper’s trophy room.

Of the many nonresident bear hunters over bait that I guided (I use the term loosely), I quickly learned that hunting was not the reason they came to Maine. Most were braggarts and merely wished to kill a bear as a trophy to prove their manliness or hunting prowess. Bear hunters and trappers are a different breed, and I came to find many of them offensive after a period of time. They are not sportsmen as I define sportsmen, who eat what they shoot. A true sportsman is far more thrilled by the ethical, lengthy and challenging pursuit than by the instant of killing of his prey.

While a case can be made for bear hunting, I know from experience that bear can be hunted in sufficient numbers without resorting to hunting and executing a Pavlov-conditioned bear over a bait pile. Maine’s IF&W cannot make a case that the annual trapping of 130 bears is a scientific or a wildlife management issue. And IF&W’s argument for justifying the

“tradition” of trapping is only as valid as saying that we should continue the practice of selling human beings as we did in the days of slavery because it was a tradition. Should we also go back to the tradition of living as a troglodyte? I think not.

Camilla: You are a standing declarant in a lawsuit against the state of Maine aimed at protecting threatened and endangered species such as Canada lynx from indiscriminate traps. Why did you join this suit?

Bill: I’m a bit of a legal buff and a former Passamaquoddy fish and wildlife consultant who wrote its hunting, fishing and trapping ordinances in 1989. I joined the Animal Protection Institute lawsuit because I do not believe the Maine IF&W is upholding the intent of the

raccoon (Bryan Eastham/www.istockphoto.com);
fox (Kenneth C. Zirkel/ www.istockphoto.com); owl
(Jill Lang/www.istockphoto.com)

federally mandated Endangered Species Act, in much the same way that the IF&W failed to get the required federal permit that has recently curtailed Maine's unneeded and inherently cruel coyote snaring program. I also know that traps and snares are not selective and often times catch non-target animals. Regardless of trapper skills, any trap can and does catch all birds and beasts, wild and domestic.

Camilla: It takes a lot of courage to speak out about something you once practiced, but now view as unacceptable and unethical. What is your hope for this issue?

Bill: I'm not sure whether it was courage or rage that finally tipped the scales. Yes, speaking against the interests of a special friend was indeed a painful experience. But I've never been a person to follow the crowd just for the sake of following the crowd. And after a four-year stint as a US Air Force Air Intelligence Operations Specialist, I learned that some of my government agents did not always tell the truth. I now welcome the opportunity to tell the truth, for doing so is an easy task. The truth of traps and trapping is one that needs to be addressed more than ever before. It is time that we learn to love and have compassion for all things.

For more information about trapping in Maine, please visit www.wildlifealliancemaine.org.



Former trapper Bill Randall now advocates against the practice and has spoken out against Maine's since-halted coyote neck snaring program.