

# Are Humane Traps “Humane”? An Animal Welfare Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** Wild animal trapping is one of humankind’s most ancient occupations having existed as non-controversial for countless millennia as part of subsistence economies worldwide. With the rise of animal welfare and protection interests in the mid-eighteenth century, however, the quiet surrounding the various practices that make up trapping seems to have ended. Not only did critics start to question the pain trapped animals experienced, but they began also to raise concerns for trapping in a broader moral context, as in Darwin’s example of the additional suffering a trapped animal might experience when the gamekeeper decides to sleep in on a cold morning (Darwin 1863). Organized opposition to the use of traps in North America can be dated to the formation of the Anti-Steel-Trap League in 1925, which campaigned for legislative bans while raising public visibility about trapping in ongoing awareness campaigns. With the rise of animal rights in the 1970’s pro- and anti- trapping interests reached an apparent impasse through their “unreconcilable philosophies” (Proulx and Barrett 1991). That did not prevent, however, movement to seek improvements in “humaneness” through advances in trap design and testing, efforts to rank and standardize injury (Iossa et al. 2007), progress on international agreements focused on best practices (Harrop 1998, Fox and Papouchis 2004) and calls for addressing animal welfare concerns, even for species labeled as “pests” (Littin et al. 2004). It is important such efforts continue and that the concept of humaneness in trapping be broadened beyond concerns for the immediate physical effects of devices to their use within a far wider practical and moral context. Among other reasons for this need is that what have been termed “antiquated systems” remain widely in use today (Proulx et al. 2015). A renewed effort to better understand why animal welfare is not treated as a first order concern in wildlife trapping is necessary. As a part of this effort, we should look beyond the trapping devices themselves and engage the broader circumstances and activities associated with their use. Trapping is a process that involves choices, decisions, actions, and results whose consequences should be amenable to evaluation, all with the objective of improving welfare. Difficulties arise in that any event involving trapping will always be set within a stochastic context where varying conditions or circumstances potentially compromise the “humaneness” of the activity. For example, even a so-called “humane” box or cage trap if left unattended in direct sun on a hot summer day can result in an agonal death for a trapped animal. Poor site selection or lax attendance can subject trapped animals to predation, and trap sets that intentionally submerge and drown animals are not humane (Ludders et al. 1999).

Warburton and Norton (2007) describe trapping as associated with moral, ethical, cultural, economic and wildlife management perspectives, identifying it as multi-dimensional in both technical as well as social respects. Progress on the technical side can be represented by the development of traps that limit the severity of injuries and rejection of traps that exceed thresholds (Iossa et al. 2007). However, because of the many variables inherent to trapping the criteria for the “humaneness” of any device must remain performance-based, so that the state-of-art device might render 70% of trapped animals or more irreversibly unconsciousness within three minutes at a ninety-five percent confidence interval (Proulx and Barrett 1994). Elsewhere, some trap designs allow for selectivity in mostly capturing specific species, leading to claims they are more “humane” because of that (Hubert et al. 1996). In both cases, claims of humaneness are simply relative to what occurs with respect to other practices, and do not mean that either the standards or devices in question are themselves humane. Welfare assessments (Sharp and Saunders 2011) can play an increasingly important role in advancing dialogue about traps as well as the practice of trapping. Matrix models can evaluate the consequence of actions as a function of their duration and begin to account for the magnitude of welfare compromise (Kirkwood et al. 1994). While the “unreconcilable

philosophies” surrounding trapping issues may threaten gridlock, the issues involved are far too significant to allow this to happen.

**Key Words:** animal protection, animal welfare, humane, traps, trapping, welfare assessment

Proceedings of the 16<sup>th</sup> Wildlife Damage Management Conference.  
(L.M. Conner, M.D. Smith, Eds). 2016. Pp. 19-20.

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