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Troubled Fur Trade and Implications for Wildlife Damage Management



The development and prosperity of the North American fur industry dates back to the first European settlements. Strong European demand for fur provided early explorers with an attractive livelihood and led to the establishment of numerous pelt trading posts. These trading posts helped the early development of North America. As fur exports grew, fur products also became popular domestically, creating thousands of jobs in the fur industry as well as industries supplying their inputs. Teisl and Southwick estimated total sales of the fur industry at \$1.9 billion in 1990, and its employment at around 5,000

Beginning in 1995, the EEC will ban fur imports originating from countries which fail to eliminate steel-jaw foothold trapping and fail to adopt a humane trapping technique such as live traps.

jobs. For the same year, the fur industry was found to generate additional sales of \$2.5 billion and more than 50,000 jobs in those industries from

which the fur industry purchased inputs. Important fur bearers include muskrat, raccoon, beaver, skunk, coyote, otter, fox, and opossum.

In addition to business and employment contributions, the fur industry helps control wildlife and the damage it sometimes causes. Now domestic and international forces are working to limit the fur trade, and we must begin to think about ways to deal with increased wildlife populations and damage.

A troubled U.S. fur market

In the late 1980s, fur industry retail sales reversed a fifteen-year trend of continuous growth and the number of furbearers trapped declined in many states. Teisl and Southwick attribute this decline to three events. The spurt in consumer demand earlier in the decade caused overproduction in the pelt market. Then the U.S. experienced an economic recession and series of warm winters. The combination of overproduction, recession, and mild winters caused pelt prices to plummet. From 1980 to 1990, the average price per beaver pelt declined from \$20.72 to \$9.28; per muskrat pelt, \$7.24 to \$1.33; and per fisher pelt, \$103.75 to \$29.54, according to Robert Gotie of the New York Department of Environmental Conservation.

Other more long-term factors also harm the fur industry. Artificial fur garments now appeal to those concerned about animal rights as well as those wanting a lower-priced product. Also, and importantly, the European Economic Community (EEC) adopted the Wild Fur Regulation (WFR). Begin-



A professional trapper sets a foot-hold trap in a beaver pond at Ames Plantation in west Tennessee. Beavers are reported to have caused extensive damage to the bottomland hardwood plantation in this area through dam-building and flooding activities.

ning in 1995, the EEC will ban fur imports originating from countries which fail to eliminate steel-jaw foothold trapping and fail to adopt a humane trapping technique such as live traps. Because the EEC is an important market for American furs, the regulation will affect the trapping of many American fur-bearing species. Even if and when the often costly humane techniques are developed, implementing the EEC's measures could be more expensive and less acceptable to trappers than foothold trapping. Though heavily criticized as inhumane, foothold trapping is the most commonly used trapping method.

Wildlife damage

Some recent damage estimates suggest the potential for increased wildlife nuisance. According to a USDA survey, U.S. cattle producers lost \$41.5 million to predator damage in 1991, with coyote damage alone responsible for

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\$24.3 million. A 1987 study estimated that wild vertebrates (beavers, voles, gophers, etc.) caused over \$10 million in annual losses to just a small part of the southern forests. Damage to field crops and timberlands appears to be



Trapper examines a beaver lodge. Note how the underbrush and lower tree branches surrounding the lodge have been cleared by beavers, compared with the underbrush evident in the background.

more prevalent in the East and Midwest, while damage to livestock is common in the West. In some cases, fur species act as disease-carrying agents, threatening human as well as livestock health. The movement in consumer demand toward artificial fur and increasing government regulation to promote humane treatment of wild animals will likely increase wildlife populations and their damage.

What to do

In the event that the fur market is unable to regulate wildlife populations, the responsibility for controlling its damage will ultimately shift to property owners and public agencies. Coordination among wildlife agencies, property owners, and the trapping industry in promoting public education, trapper education and research, and the devel-

opment of cost-effective humane trapping methods would go a long way toward containing wildlife damage. State wildlife agencies could assume the regionwide operational responsibility of animal control on private and public properties and recover their costs from the beneficiaries. ■

■ For more information

Teisl, M.F., and R. Southwick. *An Economic Profile of the U.S. Fur Industry*. International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Fur Resource Committee, August 1993.

Other references available from the author upon request.

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