

CHAPTER 9

Glamour at Any Price: The Tragedy of the Fur trade

For all wistful creatures in captivity...we ask a heart of compassion and gentle hands and kindly words.

—Albert Schweitzer
“Prayer for Animals”

When I see someone wearing a fur coat, one image comes to mind, and it has nothing to do with fashion or glamour.

The image is of a fox with its tongue frozen to the metal of a steel trap, desperately struggling to free himself...desperately trying to hold onto life.

You see, the trappers put a grease on their traps that contains a scent designed to attract animals. So naturally, the unsuspecting animal goes to lick the tasty-smelling grease. In winter, his tongue freezes to the cold metal.

In the trapper’s mind, it is a perfect situation. The animal is trapped until the trapper gets a chance to come back and check the trap—who knows, maybe several weeks from now. And best of all, the precious fur is unharmed.

There’s nothing lovely about the fur trade. I agree whole-heartedly with the anti-fur campaign slogan, “It’s a shame to wear fur!” Each year, some 17 million wild animals are killed by trapping so their furs can be made into high fashion garments. Another five million are raised and killed in abominable conditions on fur ranches. That’s 22 million animals—fox, wolves, coyotes, raccoons, bobcats, beavers, muskrats, otters, opossums, minks, among others—killed in the name of fashion. [Today, the number of trapped animals has decreased to 3 to 4 million while the number raised on fur ranches has increased dramatically to 45 million animals, including baby sheep, goats, seals, and 2 million cats and dogs.]

Ninety percent of the animals trapped are caught in steel-jaw leghold traps. The teeth have been removed from the modern leghold trap, but it remains an effective, deadly, and inexpensive way of capturing and holding animals.

In some commercial trapping, a mechanical snare is used to catch, hold, and kill an animal for his or her pelt. This practice is the last vestige of the mass killing for profit with guns and traps that went on in this country in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Over the years, trapping has resulted in the decimation of enormous numbers of our nation’s animal population. It continues today because of the value placed on furs as “fashion statements” for the rich and would-be rich.

Trapping has changed over the centuries, but its legacy of shame and torture is still with us today. Native Americans trapped with primitive snares and covered pits dug in the ground, camouflaged to catch animals for food and hides. After Europeans arrived, white trappers roamed the North American wilderness in search of animals for pelts to satisfy the Old World’s insatiable demand for furs.

The Louisiana Purchase and exploration by Lewis and Clark opened much of the Northwest and High Plains to colonization and trapping. In fact, the demand for furs was so lucrative that trappers led the way westward.

With the expansion of the fur trade came the development of new, more efficient traps and trapping techniques. One such invention was the infamous toothed-jawed leghold trap, invented by Seward Newhouse in 1823.

The leghold trap, along with the gun, played a major role in the decline of wildlife in the 19th century. By the millions, beavers, bobcats, lynx, mink, skunks, raccoons, fishers, martens, wolverines, wolves, and bears were increasingly thinned by the deadly jaws that lay in wait for them throughout the once-benign wilderness.

By the end of the 19th century, leaders in business and government, including Theodore Roosevelt, were outraged by the abusive practices and unsportsmanlike behavior of market hunters and trappers. They organized conservation clubs and began to lobby actively, supporting government regulations to curb the orgy of unrestricted hunting and trapping. Market hunting was outlawed.

Currently, state departments of fish and wildlife carry out these regulations within their borders, limiting harvests to certain seasons and setting quotas on the kinds and number of animals that can be taken.

The cause of wildlife conservation was helped considerably in the early 1900s, when the demand for pelts declined in Europe and elsewhere. Many trappers went into other work when the demand for pelts lessened and the prices went down.

The hiatus didn't last long, though. After World War II, consumers began buying furs again. The rich prized them for fashion and status and a new middle-class market developed for cut-rate fur coats.

The snap of snares being sprung and the cries of animals in pain began to echo more and more in the wilderness. The most widely used trap continued to be the steel-jaw leghold. But there were—and are—others.

There is the Conibear trap, designed to ensnare the animal and kill him or her instantly by releasing a spring-loaded device that strikes the spinal column at the base of the skull with a crushing blow. Fortunately, this one isn't used often because it is unwieldy.

Other devices include a box-type trap that catches and holds the prey alive. It is also cumbersome and not widely used. Deadfall snares catch animals in concealed pits dug into the ground from which they cannot escape. This method is too labor-intensive to be popular among trappers.

Some people defend trapping as necessary to control the wildlife population, and thus to ensure the continued existence or health of the species and to preserve habitats that would be destroyed by overpopulation. Actually, wildlife populations are regulated by available food supplies and habitat naturally. Mother Nature does a pretty good job of that herself.

The fur industry and trappers aren't motivated by the desire to preserve or manage wildlife. They're motivated by the proceeds of a multi-million dollar industry.

Let's take a look at the trapper's version of "preservation of species and wildlife management."

The infamous steel-jaw leghold trap clamps down on the paw or limb of an animal with the force of a car door crushing a human hand and being left on it indefinitely—until someone comes to open it or the animal dies. Animals caught in these traps often bite off their own limbs trying to escape. This trap is considered so tortuous that it has been banned in over 65 countries. However, only four states in the United States have banned this horrible device. [Today, the trap is banned or severely restricted in over 88 countries, but only eight states in the United States have banned this device.]

The Conibear trap has the potential for causing prolonged agony by slowly strangling its victims over a period of several hours or several days.

Laws regarding the placement and handling of traps and how often they must be checked vary widely from state to state. Some states have no checking requirements. Trapped animals left for long periods of time very often suffer and die from dehydration, freezing, starvation, or exhaustion, or are eaten by predators. Even worse, some animals have been found alive after having been left in the traps for up to two weeks.

Trapped animals may be killed by any manner the trapper chooses, so long as it doesn't damage the pelt. No laws or requirements exist to determine how they are to be killed.

Popular methods used to kill the trapped animals include beating the animal to death with a blunt instrument; slamming the animal's head against a tree or rock; stomping on the animal's chest thus slowly suffocating the animal or crushing the animal's heart; or drowning those trapped near water.

As the Friends of Animals' hard-hitting anti-fur message says, "Get a feel for fur. Slam your fingers in a car door."

The traps don't always capture the animals the trappers want to catch for pelts. An estimated five million "trash animals," such as domestic animals, wandering pets, endangered species, and unwanted wild animals accidentally wander into the traps and suffer agonizing deaths each year.

What can be done? People must refuse to buy furs, so that there will be no demand for them. Without the demand, it won't pay to trap those innocent victims.

Some people claim that fur farms offer a humane alternative to trapping in the wild as a source of pelts to be made into fur garments. But believe me, there is no humane way to make a fur coat.

More than five million wild animals, including minks, fox, and chinchillas are raised and killed on American fur ranches each year. No laws or government regulations now exist to oversee the living conditions of the animals or how they may be killed. The only standards that exist are unenforceable, voluntary guidelines created by the fur industry to try to pacify animal protectionists. Talk about the fox guarding the hen house.

These animals, whose natural habitats are in the wild where they may roam for miles, are kept in tiny, wire-mesh cages in which they barely have enough room to turn around. Many are almost insane with claustrophobia. They suffer from the heat during the hot times of the year. In 1987, 450,000 animals died due to heat stress, according to U.S. mink farmers. And this is the figure they *admit* to.

Animals raised on fur ranches are killed in the most economical and convenient manner possible without damaging the pelt. Small animals, such as minks and chinchillas, are often killed by breaking their necks manually or mechanically.

Gassing the animals with carbon monoxide or carbon dioxide is another method used. This is done as cheaply as possible. The rancher channels exhaust fumes from a running motor vehicle into the animals' enclosures. The hot, unfiltered gas burns their eyes and lungs.

Poisons, including strychnine and cyanide, are used. Even paralytic drugs are occasionally administered.

The preferred method of execution for larger animals such as fox is electrocution. This is done by clamping an electrical cable in the fox's mouth while inserting another one into the animal's rectum. Animals experience extreme pain during electrocution and scream horribly.

Other methods used to kill animals raised on a fur ranch are drowning, tying an animal upside down and hitting him on the head, or putting chloroform on the animal's nose and imprisoning her in a can.

To meet the demand for cheaper furs, countries with lower wages are getting into the fur business. South Korea, for example, has become one of the leading fur-manufacturing countries worldwide. Conditions there are even worse than in America. Many die of heat stroke in the hot, humid summers. Often, cages are dirty with animals living in their own excrement. Killing methods are similar. In Korea, dogs are raised to be eaten as meat and to be stripped of their fur pelts, which are sold under the names of other animals. The publication PETA News estimates that more than one million dog furs are exported by North Korea every year. [China, now the largest exporter of fur, raises millions of animals each year, including cats and dogs, for their fur.]

The anti-fur message is being heard. Harvests are down, and business is slowing in chic fur salons across the nation. Citizens from all over the country are beginning to voice their concerns about fur. Letters opposing the sale of fur garments are being written to newspapers. People are complaining to department stores that sell fur; distributing educational materials about how fur-bearing animals are trapped, raised, and killed; and participating in anti-fur rallies. [Today, global fur sales have been increasing although sales in the United States have fallen.]

Celebrities are joining the cause. *USA Today* has declared that "fur coats are out, cloth coats are in." Some of the famous fashion designers have announced they will no longer design clothing made of fur. One of the committees of the World Council of Churches is working for an animal-protection platform which includes opposing wearing fur. Billboards placed prominently in our cities declare that "fur is out."

The National Humane Education Society (NHES) and other human organizations have been successful in raising the consciousness of many people. But I am eager to see even more progress immediately. It's so simple: If people refuse to buy fur garments, trapping will be halted and fur farms will have to go out of business.

What will be lost when the fur trade ends? Only the hideous pain and unnecessary deaths of millions of animals. It isn't as though fur coats and hats are necessary to guard against the cold. These days, clothing made of synthetic materials is just as warm as fur. It's also lighter, easier to clean, and much less expensive to replace.

The NHES believes that there is no scientifically valid or ethical justification for commercial trapping. The NHES has come to the conclusion for the following reasons:

1. Commercial trapping causes much needless suffering of fur creatures and many other wild and domestic animals caught in traps.
2. Most of the trapping is done with steel-jaw leghold traps, which we believe are inhumane.
3. Commercial trapping is motivated more by the desire for profit than by any imperative of wildlife management, and we believe that to be ethically wrong.
4. Trapping is not scientifically valid as a wildlife management tool.
5. Nature does a better job of controlling populations of wildlife than does trapping.
6. Trapping fur creatures for their pelts to be made into garments cannot be justified ethically. Outerwear made from man-made materials is just as protective and far less costly than furs.
7. Wearing fur garments to show off one's wealth is ethically wrong, because the pelts were obtained at the cost of much suffering to innocent animals.

Commercial trapping is a vestige of the days of unrestricted market hunting and trapping. Civilization demands better of modern society. Commercial trapping persists as a relic of a more brutish time, when living creatures were subject to mass slaughter, suffering, and even extinction to satisfy man's appetite for exotic foods, fancy furs, and superfluous frills.

It is time to outlaw commercial trapping. Only then can the needless suffering of animals caught in the steel jaws of leghold and other traps, or incarcerated in the unspeakable conditions of the "fur farms," be prevented.

As The Humane Society of the United States proclaims in its anti-fur campaign, "fur is out, compassion is in." Together, we can save the lives of innocent animals, and make fur farming and trapping relics of the past.