

February 24, 2009

In 2002 I graduated with a wildlife biology degree from the University of Montana having learned the value of wildlife management and its various and sundry tools. At the time, I knew little about trapping, a practice that is often defended by state wildlife authorities. In the years since I have learned firsthand that trapping on public lands harms humans and wildlife alike. In fact, it is in many ways akin to terrorism.

For the first time in nearly two years, I returned to Rock Creek last week. Joining me were Bèla, who came to us shortly after my boy Cupcake died on the banks of this God-forsaken creek two years earlier, and Kelli, who witnessed her best friend's death on that fateful day.

I could not bear to approach Valley of the Moon, so we continued down the road a bit. We avoided the creek altogether, and chose instead to explore the crags on the grassy hills overlooking the vale, hoping we were safe up high. Although in years past I loved to meander through riparian zones in search of the wildlife that prefers them as well, I cannot now escape the sense of dread that will forever continue to haunt all creeks, streams and rivers. Particularly in wintertime, I am overcome by this fear of traps, and I wonder whether the beaver and the mink share in my fear.

As I parked the car, I sat silently for a few moments thinking ominous thoughts. The girls were clearly eager to get out, but I still sat there, trying hard to figure out in my head what I knew was quite impossible to know: "Could there be a coyote trap up there?" Finally, I forced myself out. As we began our hike, we approached a creek crossing before beginning our ascent to (hopefully) safer ground above. Even though the girls were only a few yards ahead, I called out to them desperately, corralling them close to me as I scanned the water's edge for danger. Although we were technically on the trail and traps are to be placed 50 feet away, I still could not be sure. We made it across, and after two hours of exploring the rocks, we returned safely to the car.

But as we drove back toward home and passed the Valley of the Moon turnoff, tears finally welled up in my eyes. Unwelcome memories returned: of Cupcake's cold and wet body and the smell of the wet, iron contraption still attached to his neck. They were still there behind me in the car, soaked, heavy and stiff. Only moments ago, Cupcake was bouncing playfully around a serviceberry bush, fascinated by the chirping of a restless chickadee. Then, the awful snap, gasp and cry, and my boy looking into my eyes pleading for help, which I could not give.

Ever since my beloved dog died in my arms two years ago, a Conibear trap dangling from his neck, I have tried desperately to suppress my anger, and have always carried within me an irrational burden of guilt ("Dad, why didn't you save me?"). I realize that likening trapping to terrorism will be controversial, and I do not mean to equate one with the other. There is, however a similarity. Terrorism is the attempt to achieve political ends through inflicting indiscriminate suffering and instilling indiscriminate fear. Although trappers are not pursuing a political end, their traps do operate indiscriminately and thereby mete out fear equally on all users of public lands.

I am grateful to Miss. Dopp who spoke out against trapping in her recent letter, and I appeal to reasonable folks throughout our state to put an end to this unreasonable and brutal practice.  
Filip Panusz, in memory of Cupcake

Missoula, MT