

My name is Mike Koeppen from Florence, Montana. Since the 1960's, I've been an outdoorsman, enjoying hiking, backpacking, hunting and river running. Although I no longer hunt, I'm a firm believer in Second Amendment rights and have been a member of the National Rifle Association for almost thirty years. I am also a member of Footloose Montana, a citizen group organized to ban trapping on Montana's public lands.

I first became acquainted with trapping in February of 1973, while hiking in Idaho. My Newfoundland dog stepped into a leghold trap set on the trail, and I promptly put my hand in another as I crouched down to help. I soon discovered there were five traps set within a few feet of each other, with the bait, a skinned coyote. In the years following, I encountered enough traps and snares to make winter hiking stressful. I was always on alert.

Then, late one winter day, while hiking a popular trail west of Stevensville, Montana, Jack, my small black lab, placed his head into a conibear. A conibear is a body-gripping trap designed to kill by breaking the spine. I had never seen such a trap before, and after brief moments of confusion, I found two large springs, one on each side. Jack was strangling and making horrid, gurgling noises as I tried compressing the springs. It took all my strength to push them down, but I needed a third hand to pull the dog free. Finally, with Jack going limp, I pushed the springs down and the right-hand spring, by chance, caught a retaining hook I had missed seeing. With that spring compressed, I pushed the other down and released Jack, saving his life with seconds to spare.

For years after, I pretty much avoided the winter woods, reliving the memory often in my mind. Today, with many people recreating on our public lands, encounters with traps are becoming more common. During 2008, in January and February alone, eight incidents were reported to Footloose Montana in which dogs were injured in traps, one dying in a snare. To compound this problem, traps are often set in heavily used recreation areas where conflicts are unavoidable. Many people have been "locked" out of the woods due to their fear of a trap incident.

Trapping is not hunting. The hunter follows the principle of "fair chase" and his or her goal is a quick, clean kill of a specific, targeted quarry. Trapping, in contrast, is indiscriminate, and a quick, humane death is not usually possible. Trapped animals potentially suffer pain, anxiety, and fear, the length determined by how conscientious the trapper is in checking his traps, then killed, often by clubbing. Scientific research shows that animals caught in leghold traps suffer injuries including fractured limbs, dislocations, lacerations, swelling, amputations, and severed tendons, along with broken teeth, torn lips and gums. In addition, "non-targeted" animals are inadvertently caught, often with fatal results, like the endangered Lynx, Golden Eagle, and other birds such as Stellar's Jays and Clark's Nutcrackers. All due to the commercial aspect of trapping. Trapping is a sanctioned activity by Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks that allows killing Montana's publicly owned wildlife for an individual trapper's financial profit.

In Montana, lax regulations governing the Furbearer Trapping Program allow traps to be set 30 feet from the centerline of public roads, 50 feet from trails, and 300 feet from trailheads. Only four species - bobcat, otter, fisher, and wolverine - even have a quota limiting their "take."

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks merely recommends that traps be checked every forty-eight hours, but in reality, a trapper can wait as long as he wants between checks. The state wildlife agency reports that annually between 45,000 and 50,000 furbearers are killed due to year-round trapping of some predators and non-game species and the official furbearer season, which begins

in September and ends in April. This number does not include unreported animals and the incidental trapping of non-targeted species. In the past, Montana citizens have made numerous attempts to strengthen trapping regulations, such as longer setbacks, mandatory trap checks, and warning signs. In 2005, former legislator Gail Gutsche introduced a trapping bill, but it never made it out of committee. All efforts to strengthen regulations were stridently opposed by the Montana Trapper's Association, whose well-organized members turned out in force. There was never an attempt at compromise by the trappers.

Trappers claim that if trapping is banned, hunting will be next. Nothing is further from the truth. Footloose Montana begins and ends with banning trapping, and only on public lands. In western states where trapping has been banned, such as Arizona, Washington, Colorado, and California, most in the 1990's, there have been no movements against hunters. In addition, banning traps from public lands will not preclude a farmer or rancher, or trapper for that matter, from trapping animals on private land.

Unlike hunting and fishing, trapping infringes on other recreationist's outdoor experience, free from anxiety for themselves and their pets. It's time to make our public lands safe for all recreationists and end this inhumane, commercial activity. For more information, please visit [FootlooseMontana.org](http://FootlooseMontana.org).