



Find common ground on trapping - Sunday, January 11, 2009

The forests of western Montana beckon trappers and dog-walkers alike, year-round, and by the thousands. And yet, it's the very thing they share that has driven a wedge between those who promote trapping on public lands and those who want to end it.

That wedge will only divide us further into pro- and anti-trapping groups if we don't start staking out some common ground. Only an estimated 3,000 people get trapping licenses through Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks each year - a mere fraction of the hundreds of thousands of Montanans who roam our shared acres. Not all of these recreationists would like to see trapping outlawed on public lands - but eventually, they will if traps continue to cause death and injury to their dogs.

It is impossible for anyone with a heart to ignore the heart-wrenching stories - and gut-wrenching images - of people's beloved pets caught and mangled by traps. We still haven't forgotten Cupcake, the border collie cross who died after being caught in an illegally set conibear trap not far from a Forest Service trailhead about two years ago. Or Otis, the beagle cross who was injured by a leghold trap last month.

The conibear trap that killed Cupcake was set illegally, and the trapper who owned it was cited. Montana FWP has rules and regulations for trapping specifically designed to minimize the number of conflicts with dogs. Every trapper who violates these rules gives the entire profession a black eye, and no one knows this better than the members of the Montana Trappers Association, which regularly holds classes to teach trappers about respective laws in the state. However, the leghold trap that caught Otis was perfectly legal - despite the fact that it was set only about 20 feet off of Lost Horse Road in the Bitterroot Valley. Otis' experience was far from isolated, and no one knows this better than the members of Footloose Montana, which has become a clearinghouse for stories of run-ins between dogs and traps.

The two nonprofits are both expected to have a presence at the Montana Legislature this session, where at least two bills have been proposed concerning trapping. One would require first-time trappers to take an education course, and tellingly, the Montana Trappers Association has already stated its support for this. The other bill would give Montana FWP greater authority to take a commercial fur dealer's license for violating certain regulations.

This seems like as good a time as any for the folks at Footloose Montana and the Montana Trappers Association to talk - through a mediator, if necessary. We would dearly love to see these two well-intentioned groups sit down together to identify some common ground:

- n They could start by acknowledging that trappers have a right to trap, and dog owners have the right to walk their dogs off-leash, but that neither of these rights are unlimited.

- n They might also agree that there are irresponsible trappers and irresponsible dog owners, and that the irresponsible few do not represent all trappers and dog owners.

- n When it comes to safety, both Footloose Montana and the Trappers Association, as well as FWP, offer trap-release clinics. That is a good thing, and perhaps they should combine their

efforts to promote them.

n It would behoove the Trappers Association to identify the places where trappers frequently trap, and Footloose Montana to identify the places where dog-walkers frequently walk. Then, swap lists and disseminate them as widely as possible.

We don't pretend that any of these are new or especially brilliant ideas. Rather, they are good places to start a constructive discussion that got tossed aside a little too quickly in the rush to lay blame and claim the moral high ground.

But those arguments don't get us any closer to a solution everyone can live with. They certainly do nothing to make our public lands safer for everyone to use.

If Montana is going to make its public lands safer for families and pets without tramping the rights of trappers, we all have to remember: It's a matter of finding common ground.

More online

Learn more about Footloose Montana at footloosemontana.org.

The Web site for the Montana Trappers Association is www.montanatrappers.org.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks also has a lot of information about trapping on its Web site, at fwp.mt.gov/hunting/trapping.