

Feeling the Squeeze

Inhumane. Outdated. Dog killers. Trappers hear the criticism from all sides, but remain steadfast in defending one of the state's oldest traditions.

by [Erika Fredrickson](#)

Three summers ago, David Cronenwett stood in front of 13 guests at the Pine Butte Guest Ranch in Choteau holding a beaver pelt in his hands. As the ranch's natural history educator, it was Cronenwett's job to provide background stories to guests before they headed out to explore the Pine Butte Swamp Preserve. He had just finished explaining the early beaver boom in North America, and he was in the middle of describing the beaver's current role in the wetlands, when a guest suddenly interjected: She wanted to know how he had acquired the beaver pelt. When Cronenwett suggested that a local trapper probably donated it, the woman sat back angrily and said, "That dirty bastard."

It wasn't the first time Cronenwett had met with this kind of reaction, but being a trapper himself, he took the comment personally.

"I tried not to come off defensive," Cronenwett says. "I told her I was a trapper. I told her that it was one way to supplement a living, a way to get outside and interact with the landscape, and to be connected to a tradition that's been going on for millennia."

As the week went on, Cronenwett and the guests took hikes across the prairie and into the mountains. The time spent together, he says, helped diffuse the tension.

"You're with these folks for many hours of the day and it's a good way to get to know people," Cronenwett says. "Once you get to know people, it's much easier to have these discussions."

On a larger scale, discussions about trapping don't come quite as easily. Over the last few decades, trapping has become a hot button, emotional issue in western Montana. The passion has escalated even more in the past few years, especially around urban settings like Missoula and in the developing Bitterroot and Flathead valleys. Stories in the news about domestic dogs maimed or killed in traps have driven a large portion of the uproar. But other issues about trapping rise to the surface with equal fury, such as the ethics of trapping and its overall safety in an ever-populating West. In the early 1980s, the late trapper and renowned conservationist Bud Moore all but predicated the debate when he told *Fur, Fish and Game* magazine that, while he personally felt trapping could still play a role in the modern landscape, it would ultimately be society at large that would determine whether it's good or not, and whether it would continue.

As society at large carries out that debate, trappers find themselves increasingly on the defensive. Even a starting point to the conversation—an understanding of what trapping is—can be hard to pin down. For instance, the Bitterroot-based anti-trapping group Footloose Montana states on its website: "Trapping is a poorly understood activity in Montana—and trapping organizations would like to keep it that way." Meanwhile, the National Trappers Association's ethics handbook states: "Trappers who act responsibly and

ethically don't have anything to hide. However, they need to appreciate the fact that most people know little or nothing about trapping."

Montana's Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), which supports trapping for management and regulates it for recreational use, agrees that a basic ignorance about trapping remains a huge obstacle.

"Groups that oppose regulated trapping have painted it as unduly cruel, dangerous and a threat to wildlife populations," says FWP wildlife biologist Jay Kolbe. "The vast majority of the general public has, at best, only a passing knowledge of it, and these messages may be all they have with which to form an opinion.

"The facts are much different," Kolbe continues. "Today, most trappers use specialized methods and equipment to hold or dispatch animals ethically and which limit the possibility of non-target captures. Many of the traps that caused the recent and highly publicized injuries to dogs were illegally set. Fact is, trappers who follow the law will avoid most conflicts; those that don't will and should be prosecuted like any other game-law violator."

As anti-trapping groups push for change, many trappers realize they need to do a better job of defending their place in society. The task at hand isn't as simple as merely explaining the mechanics of trapping and hoping that will suffice. For those trappers who consider themselves progressive and conscientious, it means addressing the ethics of what they do, and having a much deeper conversation about wildlife and land-use. In short, it's about proving that in a swiftly changing landscape, trappers are still relevant. And it's a point some of them are already working hard to drive home.

Footloose Montana has established itself as one of the most vocal critics of trapping in the state. In 2009, the organization, which focuses on domestic dogs in traps, formed Montanans for Trap-Free Public Lands and campaigned for Citizens' Initiative 160. The ballot initiative aimed to ban all trapping on public lands with the exception of trapping used for science, propagation, health and safety. Though the initiative didn't make it on the ballot, the campaign succeeded in stirring up strong emotions on all sides of the issue.

On its website, Footloose Montana offers at least 10 examples of stories relating to dogs getting killed or hurt in traps. The organization also cites examples of birds and other non-target animals that have met their demise due to either illegally set traps or, in some cases, legal traps set near high-use recreation areas.

A few months ago, not far off the Fred Burr Trail in the Bitterroot, a couple of cross-country skiers discovered a dead Clark's Nutcracker in an elevated leg hold trap. The skiers notified FWP and gave Footloose Montana the photos with a request to remain anonymous for fear of backlash from the offending trapper. Other stories surfaced over the past winter including one from a family in Wolf Creek whose Labrador showed up with a trap on his paw eight days after he went missing. For Footloose supporters and many dog owners, trapping on public lands is unnecessarily risky.

"I've been kept hostage by the trapping season because I don't want to expose my dogs to the danger," says Anja Heister, Footloose's executive director. "Now I go to the places around Missoula and I'm not using the public lands that I pay taxes for."

For many anti-trappers, the issue stretches beyond the danger posed to domestic dogs. Broader arguments include trap cruelty, the "incidental" trapping of endangered species or non-target animals, and a lack of regulation by FWP.

"It is a good-old-boy club where the trappers make the regulations," says Heister. "There are a lot of trappers within Fish, Wildlife and Parks. They have a furbearer coordinator who is an avid trapper, and game wardens who are trappers."

Last year, over 4,000 trappers purchased licenses in the state of Montana. One of the main concerns for Footloose is that trappers don't have to take an education course to get a license, and theoretically trappers can also set out a limitless number of traps.

The law requires lethal traps be set 300 feet away from trails, while a snare has to be at

least 1,000 feet away. FWP sets quotas on four species—bobcat, otter, wolverine and fisher—and trappers must notify the agency if one is caught. But for many other species, there is no limit on how many animals can be trapped. Footloose claims there's little enforcement, and even less incentive for trappers to adhere to suggestions like checking traps every 48 hours. For the organization and its supporters, trappers don't care.

"In my personal opinion most trappers couldn't care less about animals suffering," says Heister.

It's a damning conclusion for trappers. Though many of the cases involving domestic dogs are linked to illegal trapping, the incidents have become the black mark on all trappers and, subsequently, the chief argument for a ban. It's exactly the kind of example Footloose needs to champion another ballot initiative.

"In the United States," Footloose Montana states, "trapping is an overwhelmingly recreational activity, meaning animals—including, every year, family pets—suffer for fun. Meanwhile, the pelts a trapper does sell are probably adorning a fur coat worn by a rapper wannabe in some urban center far from Montana's high mountains."

Dee Baker has heard the criticism that trapping is purely about recreation. Almost no trappers in the state makes a living on trapping these days—market prices are far too low and, in general, modern activities and the modern lay of the land has changed its viability as a commercial activity.

But for Baker, it's the very fact that trapping is no longer highly commercialized that makes it valuable and viable. Fur booms of the past have taught him that large-scale competition, unchecked, can lead to disastrous consequences. Like a local foodie who prefers a community garden to industrial agriculture, Baker likes to see his fur kept small-scale and local.

Baker's history of trapping in the Seeley area backs up his views. When he arrived in Seeley in 1978 there was a strong commercial market for fur. That particular fur boom started in the 1960s and lasted through the early 1980s, with beaver pelts selling from \$80 to \$100 each. Seeley-Swan beaver pelts, says Baker, were considered some of the best quality at the North American Fur Auctions in Canada.

"This valley's famous for its furs, especially beaver," he says. "They are a rich, lustrous color, and when they go on commercial fur markets they're graded [on par] with Alaskan and Canadian beaver."

The fur boom brought trappers from Great Falls, Kalispell and other parts of the state to the valley, adding to the 20 or 30 trappers that already lived and worked there.

"The beavers just got hammered," Baker says. "They didn't get wiped out, but the population got low. At that point, the Montana Trapping Association (MTA) stepped in and told Fish and Game that beaver were being over-harvested."

For five years, beaver season was closed. When FWP opened it again, only a limited number of beaver could be trapped. The new quota, coupled with a commercial market on a downslide, brought the beaver population back.

It's a bittersweet moment in history for trappers. A certain amount of greed and a certain lack of foresight endangered the species, but Baker says it was a lesson for local trappers to take leadership with issues of resource management.

"There have been a lot of instances like this in history where trappers as an organization have stepped in to protect resources," Baker says.

Baker grew up on a farm in rural Tennessee and graduated from the University of Montana with a degree in sociology. At the age of 32 he moved to Seeley and, at the suggestion of a friend, learned how to trap. He trapped commercially for 12 years, often heading on long ski trips into the Bob Marshall Wilderness. It was a lifestyle with which he felt comfortable.

"I think growing up in a rural area on a farm your perception of animals can sometimes be quite different than people in an urban area," says Baker. "Your consciousness is formed from everyday relationships with animal populations. It's not formed by media or Walt Disney or Hollywood—and I'm not saying one is better than the other; I'm saying there's a real difference. If I came from a different place I might have thought trapping was a terrible way to kill an animal. But growing up where I did, that's not how I looked at it."

The Seeley–Swan has changed significantly over the past decade. The few residents like Baker who continue to trap have had to adjust to a population influx, to people living and recreating on land that had been untouched. With the influx, Baker says, came a change in attitude toward trapping.

"There are people in the community now who don't look favorably at trapping—unless they have beavers eating trees in their yard or foxes eating their chickens," he says.

Instead of shrinking away from the change, Baker has embraced it by thinking locally. In 2001, he and his wife opened an artisan shop called The Grizzly Claw Trading Company, where he serves espresso, hosts literary readings by local writers, and sells the wares of 60 Montana artisans. Among the store's inventory is a small selection of fur pillows, fur hats and jewelry made from beaver teeth and claws. The fur comes directly from trap lines Baker's been working for over 30 years—with the exception of a few areas that are now subdivisions.

"It's a mixed blessing," he says. "I regret those places are so populated and, at the same time, it's hard to have a retail business when no one is coming through your door. I just hope the development is planned so that the wild spaces here stay wild."

David Cronenwett grew up in New Jersey and earned a music degree from Cornish College with an emphasis in classical guitar. Despite his urban beginning, Cronenwett's interest in natural history led him to rural Montana. In 2003, he founded the Wilderness Arts Institute, which offers courses in ethno–botany, birding, fire–starting and shelter–building, among other skills. He considers himself a naturalist first, and only an occasional trapper. When he traps, he hikes into the woods on foot or with snowshoes, setting traps and collecting the fur for personal use as clothing lining and outdoor accessories. But having spent time in both big cities and rural areas like the Yaak Valley and Choteau, he's thought a lot about the debate over contemporary trapping.

On his natural history blog called "A View From Aerie Mountain," Cronenwett usually writes about fire ecology, wind impacts, prairie islands and birds, often combining hard science with meditative thoughts on nature. But after watching the anti–trapping campaign begin to build last year, and sometimes finding himself on the defensive with guests at the Pine Butte Ranch, he decided to tackle the issue in a blog post he titled "On Trapping." In the post, he explores the way anti–trappers frame trapping in contrast to other activities like hunting, conservation support and dog walking.

Hunting, in particular, has seen changes in perception over the last decade. Though extreme animal rights activists view killing any animal as egregious, many in Montana—including Footloose—view ethical hunting as an important part of the local food movement, and not antithetical to animal welfare. Trapping does not hold the same position of reverence.

Though Cronenwett doesn't equate the two activities, he questions whether it's a fair assessment to see them so differently.

"There is a strong message that hunting is good but trapping is bad," he wrote on the blog. "Apparently, there are some who believe that all hunts end with a quick and humane kill, but...there are some very ethical folks who have taken shots that unintentionally caused great suffering...Does this mean that hunting should be banned because accidents happen occasionally?"

Another comparison between hunting and trapping makes the point that a hunter eats the animal he kills, providing valuable sustenance. Most trappers don't eat the meat, but

Cronenwett says that the money gained from pelts provides a need in the same way eating does. And just because a trapper doesn't eat his kill, it doesn't mean the meat's going to waste. Dee Baker, for instance, says he uses the flesh for bait, or leaves it for birds and other animals to eat.

"The carcass is recycled into trapping coyotes," explains Baker. "If I trap the coyotes, then it's been used. If I don't, then that meat gets recycled back into the animal kingdom."

Yet another comparison between hunting and trapping takes issue with the level of skill involved in trapping. Hunters take time to track an animal while, according to trapping critics, trappers simply set down traps and leave. Cronenwett says that just as unethical hunters will be sloppy in their work, an unethical trapper will do the same. But if you are an ethical trapper, it's a labor-intensive, time-consuming endeavor.

"Trapping isn't like hunting where you could go out for a few hours and then be done," says Cronenwett. "There are a lot more logistics. You need to get several sets out there in different locations, check your traps every day or every other day, and then go get them again. It's something that takes planning."

Cronenwett also takes issue with the idea that anti-trappers get so furious about trappers killing wildlife, but not with others who may make a larger, albeit less direct, impact. In "On Trapping" he compared a jet-setting corporate lawyer and what impacts are to a "local-rural-guy who supplements his income with some beaver trapping."

"It gets him outside locally and as such, is part recreation and provides a service to local ranchers who would like to hang on to some of their cottonwood trees...," he writes of the local. "While the attorney's impacts are unseen and unrecognized, they are significant. I am admittedly painting a simplistic example...but am doing so to illustrate the fact that these issues are complex..."

Cronenwett acknowledges one of the biggest marks against trapping is the issue of dogs getting hurt or killed in traps. He says it's, once again, a circumstance of unethical trapping. Trappers like him who have never had run-ins with dogs say that with adjustments in land use and more trapper education, the tradition could continue without public conflicts.

"As far as dogs ending up in traps," Cronenwett says, "that needs to be mitigated and I think there's room to compromise."

In fact, Cronenwett sees other areas where trappers and anti-trappers could find common ground. He wrote on his blog that trapping of "rare animals" like wolverines should be "halted immediately." The biting reaction he received from fellow trappers after that post, however, confirmed just how entrenched they are in their ways. It will take time for trappers to truly engage in an open dialog about the future of their work.

"My biggest beef with trapping is there is no ethical trapping movement," says Cronenwett. "Trappers need to step up and write about these issues, think about them...This discussion, this battle over trapping is important, because this is a place where it can still be done and it can be done well."

Numerous peer-reviewed studies show trapping on a local level can reduce the numbers in an immediate area and mitigate conflicts with land owners. For people like Joe Miller, experience backs up those studies. He is regularly allowed to trap coyotes sneaking onto ranches, or "damage beaver" that cause flooding and harm private property.

"Beaver will overpopulate and eat themselves out of house and home, and the [excess] will die by disease and starvation rather rapidly," he says. "And, in the process, they do so much damage."

Whether there's a study or not, when the coyotes stop showing up on a ranch for the calving season, his job is done.

Miller defines an "environmentalist" as someone who is a steward of the land. It wasn't that long ago—10 years or so, he says—that his definition would have been different—"some

greenie, tree-hugger down in Missoula." His role as a trapper has brought him face-to-face with those tree-huggers, and it used to be something he despised.

But in 2003, Miller was asked by the Montana Trapping Association to talk with a group of college students about trapping at Northwest Connections—a nonprofit founded by UM environmental studies grad and executive director Melanie Parker, her husband, conservation specialist Tom Parker, and Bud Moore. At first he was uncomfortable speaking to a crowd of people who likely held anti-trapping views. After the first talk, however, his view changed.

"I just immediately fell in love with it," says Miller. "It forced me to think outside the box."

Miller's talks usually focus on his time spent on ranches like the Union Creek Ranch in the Potomac Valley, where he traps coyotes. The ranchers tell Miller that, though they lose some animals to direct coyote predation, they lose even more during calving season when stressed heifers sense coyotes on the perimeter.

"If you take coyotes out, more will come in," Miller says. "You're not trying to eradicate the population, you're trying to reduce the impact via trapping."

First, he reduces the population in the immediate vicinity and then creates a barrier by trapping around the perimeter.

"Coyotes are incredibly smart animals," says Miller. "The risk is not worth the reward: They're that savvy. There's still the ebb and flow of coyotes from the Garnets in the big picture. But the felt impact at the ranch is noticeably lessened."

Serious trappers like Miller put enormous efforts into trapping. For his coyote work, Miller spends three months out of the year prepping equipment and scouting out areas before he ever sets a single trap. Last year he scouted out a potential line that took him from ranches in Seeley through the Potomac Valley, across the Garnets to Bearmouth and up to Drummond. When he did set up the trap line—about 100 traps in all—he ran it on rotation so he could check the traps within 48 hours.

"That's what I could handle," he says. "If I had more than that I felt like my work would get sloppy."

That's not to say his trapping has been perfect. As with hunting, accidents happen. Over the course of five years Miller admits he's accidentally snared two deer—one of which was released safely. The other one ran into the trap when a logging project sprang up nearby. Though Miller had scouted out deer routes beforehand, the unanticipated logging project funneled the herd toward his trap line.

"I felt really bad about it," he says. "I really sat back and thought twice about ever snaring again, but I continued to because most of it I can predict."

Any kind of wildlife management carries the weight of controversy. While FWP considers trapping to be a tool, Miller knows that others doubt it. Over the last couple years he says he's had to defend trapping more and more. Even Melanie Parker at Northwest Connections challenged him to think deeper about why he does what he does. Specifically, she asked Miller: What if we didn't trap and we let all the predators and prey sort it out?

"If there's one person who can make a statement and force me to think, it's Mel Parker," laughs Miller. "I have to say, I pondered that question, literally, for months. There was not a day that went by that that question didn't go through my head."

For Miller, the answer isn't cut-and-dried. And even between trappers and FWP, there isn't always an agreement on how wildlife should be managed. The most important thing, he says, is that the conversation continues.

"I never used to respect other people in regard to anti-trapping sentiment," says Miller. "Now, I respect their opinion. I really do. I understand where they're coming from, and it's not my mission to convert them to supporters of trapping. My mission is to hear them out

and, if they want, to share the knowledge I have so they can think clearly about the issue, too. It works both ways."

Mike Stevenson tracks carnivores from the backyard of his cabin at the base of the Mission Mountains all the way to the top of the peaks. Using a snowmobile, skis and snowshoes, he works his way up designated trails, documenting animal tracks. He'll note small ones like mice and rabbit, but mostly he has his eye out for carnivores like wolverine, lynx, mountain lion and fisher. When he sees those tracks he punches their locations into a GPS device, adding to the long list of data he's collected over 12 years.

Stevenson is a former trapper currently on staff with Northwest Connections. Along with Tom Parker and a few other trackers, he is working to map how carnivores travel on the landscape and how variation in habitat affects them. It's a project that's helped him put into perspective the life and death issues—the suffering—that wildlife deals with on a day-to-day basis, as well as in the broader ecosystem.

Stevenson's interest in wildlife and trapping started when he was growing up in Montana and Alaska where his father worked as a forest ranger. He recalls veteran trappers hanging around the ranger stations. One of those trappers was Bud Moore, whom he met when he was 13 and whose articles Stevenson read in *Fur, Fish and Game*.

"Those old-time trappers were the ones that really got out there more than anyone else," says Stevenson. "They kind of knew the secrets of the forest. They were our mentors and heroes, and we wanted to know what they knew."

Despite his early romantic ideals, Stevenson doesn't pretend that trapping occurs without suffering. He does believe the perception of traps being cruel has been exaggerated through anti-trapping campaigns, especially since new technology has made kill traps more efficient.

"I do have a lot of experience using conibears with beaver, muskrat and marten and they kill very quickly," he says. "You can tell when an animal's been alive in a trap because they'll pull the wire and there will be tracks and scrapes and claw marks. But 99 times out of 100, when those animals are caught in a conibear, it comes down on the back of the neck and [kills] it."

Leg hold traps are different. They generally cut off the blood supply and numb the leg. A No. 3 offset jaw leg hold for a coyote, for example, catches the front foot and holds it without forcing the jaws to dig in.

"When an animal is caught in a leg hold trap—don't let any trapper fool you—yes, there is pain and that animal is scared," says Stevenson. "But it's not as gruesome as a lot of the anti-trappers try to paint it to be. Animals will fight it, but usually not for long, and then they'll just kind of lay around until you come up."

That animals like mink have reportedly chewed off their leg to get out of a trap doesn't indicate that it's the norm, adds Stevenson.

With leg holds, trappers have to kill the animal themselves. Stevenson says he kills coyotes with a .22 pistol. Smaller animals can be killed with a stick.

"I know it sounds like clubbing baby seals," says Stevenson, "but it's an effective way to dispatch a small animal. Then you can stop the heart with your foot or hand by stepping on the [chest]."

It's the kind of details left out of fairytales and nursery rhymes, but for Stevenson, the death and pain associated with trapping needs to be understood relative to the rest of the natural world.

"Animals don't just lie down under a tree and go to sleep," says Stevenson. "They usually die of starvation or another animal eats them. There's a lot of pain out there and for us to participate in the reality of the natural world, is part of that circle."

When I-160 hit the Montana Trappers Association's (MTA) radar two years ago, the group met with several organizations in western Montana to rally for support. Most of those organizations were already on the trappers' side, such as cattlemen and outdoor sporting groups. But MTA did meet with Footloose Montana a couple of times, before Footloose drew the proverbial line in the sand.

Jim Anderson, a regional director for MTA, says that while it's his hope to broker another discussion between the groups, the prospect of it going anywhere looks grim.

"Some kind of forum would be nice where we can get together," he says. "It is such an emotional issue for people...whether or not we are adequately or properly doing a good job of managing our wildlife, some people simply are not going to change their mind."

Footloose remains steadfast in its conviction that trapping on public lands for commercial and recreational purposes must be stopped. The group continues to map out trap locations so that those people recreating on public lands can avoid them. It continues to put on workshops for dog owners who want to learn how to release their pets from traps. Most importantly, it will continue to fundraise and build support for its cause in the hopes of gaining enough signatures so that, within the next couple of years, it can finally put trapping up for public vote.

"Trapping is a privilege that can be taken away by society at any time," says Heister. "It's cruel and it keeps the public hostage. It needs to end."

Despite the impasse, many trappers remain committed to a broader discussion of what they do, and how they do it. The issue for them isn't just if trapping should continue, but how to continue it ethically. It's more of a discussion to be had among themselves, as opposed to with organizations like Footloose.

In Cronenwett's sign-off for his post about trapping he made his plea not to the anti-trappers out there, but trappers whose way of life is at stake and whose reputation is on the line.

"The image of the bloodthirsty, cruel trapper plying his trade in the backcountry...must be overcome," he wrote. "Trapping based on ecology, legitimate cultural values and unassailable ethics is the only kind of trapping that will survive in the United States and elsewhere in the future."

