Where have all the trappers gone?

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Where have all the trappers gone? That is a question I have asked myself, and have been asked many times by other people. Of course I know a couple of old trappers that live in Butler County that still run trap lines, but they usually only do it part-time.

So what about the younger generations, why don’t they trap? There are several reasons I think the number of trappers has dropped in Alabama over the years. One reason is the stigma of trapping. Some people think that trapping is cruel and inhumane. But what they do not realize is that throughout the United States, trapping has helped bring back certain animal populations that were once threatened or endangered. Trapping also helps the ecosystem by maintaining the natural balance between different species of wildlife.

The second reason might be the stereotyping of people that trap. What do you think of when somebody mentions trappers? I’ve heard all kinds of stereotypes: lazy, outlaws, poorly educated, and smelly (this one can be true if met at the right time), just to name a few. These descriptions come from people who have never set a trap line. Setting traps can be hard work, and most of the trappers I know are well educated; some even have degrees in guess what? . . . wildlife management!

Probably the main reason we don’t have many younger trappers today can be traced back to the early-to-mid 1980s. In the late ‘70s to early ‘80s when fur prices were high, the sale of trapping licenses rose to over 6,000 in Alabama. Then around 1985, prices of fur dropped and people lost interest. By 2003 to 2004, trapping license sales dropped to just below 400. When fur prices dropped, the trappers didn’t see a need to teach the younger generations.

The last reason is the category into which I fall. As a kid, I always had an itch to learn how to trap, but never had any one to teach me. My uncle trapped raccoons in the early ‘80s, but I never really had the chance to go with him to check his traps because he ran them in the morning while I was in school. I do remember seeing his traps in the creeks where I hunted and the pans covered with aluminum foil to attract raccoons (he didn’t use bait for fear of catching somebody’s dog).

So, I never got into trapping. That is, until 2008, when Mike Sievering, wildlife biologist retired from the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR), conducted a youth trapping workshop in Butler County. Still having that itch some 30 or more years later, I volunteered to cook lunch for the kids and mentors just to see if it was something that I might finally learn. Two years later, I signed up my daughter for the class and my wife came along as well. We have been trapping as a family ever since. For the last three years I have been a mentor, taking a group of youths out into the field and showing them how to set water traps along with a few land traps.

While I was asking myself the question about trappers, Mike Sievering was asking the same question. He realized that the art and pleasure of trapping was being lost to a whole generation. Mike has been a trapper for many years, even stating that trapping helped pay his way through college. So in 2007 Mike started a youth trapping workshop with 20 kids in attendance. The next (Continued on page 20)
Some Misconceptions about Trapping in the South

The fur you catch pays for your trapping expenses.
Unfortunately, southern fur bearing pelts are not very valuable. If you consider the amount of time spent trapping, skinning, preparing, and shipping the fur to market, you wouldn’t make enough money to pay for your gas. Some of the older trappers and even a few younger ones still prepare fur for market, but this is just an added bonus. Most trappers make their money from a ‘bounty’ or a flat rate they are paid.

Trapping is easy; all you have to do set traps.
Well, there’s a little more to it than that. First, you need to learn about the specific animal you are trying to trap, such as what they like to eat, how they travel, what kind of attractants are best suited for them, what is the best trap for them, and what is the best set-up for that animal. Once all these considerations have been determined, you still have to actually set the traps. Land trapping is time consuming because you have to make each set for the trap. You also have to consider that when setting water traps, you are wading up to your hips in water or walking in deep mud, carrying all your trapping equipment. Personally, I enjoy water trapping. If I set ten conibear traps out in one area, for me, that is a lot of traps.

Trapping is a cruel way to catch animals for fur or remove unwanted animals.
You may be surprised to learn that laws and modern traps developed by trappers prevent unnecessary injury to animals. Foot-hold traps used today have smooth jaws (no teeth) and just hold the animal’s leg. If checked every 24 hours (as required by law), the animal can be released with no harm done most of the time. I’ve walked up on several animals caught in leg hold traps that are sleeping beside the trap. Conibear or body grip traps are similar to big mouse traps that dispatch caught animals very quickly. Some trappers use live or cage traps to catch nuisance animals or to move threatened/endangered species to a new location.

Trapping is not needed any more.
Trapping is actually one of the most cost-effective and efficient means to remove unwanted or nuisance animals. The practice has been around for a long time, but was mostly focused on beaver, one of the most destructive nuisance animals. Every year, beavers cause millions of dollars in damage to timber, roads, and pond dams. Nowadays with urban sprawl and people moving into the country, natural habitat is being lost and encounters with wildlife such as coyotes and raccoons is occurring more often. When these encounters happen too close to home, the homeowners want the animals removed and the only way is to trap them. Trapping has also been used as a means to repopulate animals that are plentiful in one part of the country to another area where the population is low.

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year he conducted four workshops scattered throughout Alabama. In 2015, six youth workshops and one adult workshop were conducted.

These workshops cover the basics of trapping such as trapping history, trapping laws, ethics, different types of traps, and how to set the traps. This is a three-day class with the first day spent in the classroom, and the second day spent in the field learning how to make sets and determine where to place them. On the last day, the students go out to check their traps and bring back their catch. Once back at the rendezvous site, instructors teach the kids how to properly skin the animals and prepare the hides for market or tanning.

Seven years later I’m still trapping. I might not be the best, but I enjoy getting out into the swamps and beaver ponds setting traps for North America’s largest rodent or the occasional otter. My wife and daughter still enjoy sloshing around setting their traps where they think a beaver might swim. Trapping for us is just an excuse to turn off the television, put down the cell phone (you do not want to drop it in a beaver pond), and get out of the house. Yes, it can be hard work but it is also very enjoyable. I mainly trap for the pleasure of trapping, or to help a friend with beaver problems, or to make a little extra money.

If you are interested in attending one the trapping workshops, or have kids aged 6 to 18 years of age that might be interested in trapping, visit the ADCNR web page (www.outdooralabama.com) for trapping workshop dates and locations, or call (205) 339-5716. Another good source for trapping information in our state is the Alabama Trappers and Predator Control Association (www.atpca.org).

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