

THE CHANGING FUTURE OF TRAPPING IN NORTH WESTERN ONTARIO

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Background Information

A huge part of Canadian history is rooted in the fur trade. The arrival of Europeans ushered in the historical era which saw the establishment of numerous trading centres. This change established a market economy and gave traditional native groups a way to make money as trappers and hunters. The industry of trapping helped to establish Canada as a country; we became world renowned for our beaver and related fur bearing mammal pelts. Trapping continued as a viable way of generating income for hundreds of years; it is only recently that economic decline has caused a shift in the way this practise is carried out.

My interest stemmed from this recent shift in the culture of outdoor activities. My father had been an avid outdoors man since his early childhood and passed on this love to me. He took up trapping as a means of supplemental income when we relocated to the northern Ontario city of Kenora. I only had one opportunity to join him trapping and enjoyed it immensely. As the years passed however the price of furs dropped further and further until it became a financial burden. My father gave up the rights to the line he was trapping and has chosen not to begin again. This personal experience stemmed my interest in trapping as both a recreational pastime and a job. It led to a base understanding of the culture of trapping and the issues surrounding the current decline in trappers and economy.

Methods

Since the cultural scene I choose to study does not generally congregate in one place I choose to utilize a variety of methods to gather my information. I began with an interview with Matt Wilkie concerning his history of hunting and trapping in Thunder Bay. Using the information he gave me, I connected with a young man named Kyle Miclash who took me

“shooting”. I also learnt about an Annual Trappers Convention in Thunder Bay on the weekend of March 1st. I not only had the opportunity to spend two days at the convention observing, but I also attended the Annual Trappers Ball at the Slovakian Hall on March 2nd. After completing other semi-structured interviews, I went rabbit snaring. A review of both scholarly and popular literature completed my research.

Introduction

Canadians hunt and trap for a variety of reasons. Some do so for wild life management as hunting and trapping are used to control and possibly reduce wildlife populations in order to create a functioning ecosystem. Trapping is highly regulated in order to create an optimized balance within the environment. Acquiring income is also another widely cited method for participation in this culture. Still others partake for recreational means such as enjoyment and to “get outside”. Trappers are a valuable source of information to those involved in wildlife management careers as they provide population data. Unfortunately, a decline in trappers means a reduction in our countries ability to manage its wildlife populations as well as a loss of data for researchers.

Ontario is one of the largest suppliers of wild furs in the world. As previously mentioned, this has been a large part of Canada’s historical background. The beaver, a commonly trapped fur bearing mammal, is a widely recognized symbol of Canada and its culture. Many trappers rely on this activity as either a supplemental or critical source of income. Yet trappers are under siege. Urbanization has caused a significant loss in wild life habitat while a failing market has put financial strain on those who rely on trapping for income. Crown land is being lost as it becomes fragmented and privatized due to residential development. On top of these

environmental issues, the political animal rights movement is beginning to restrict trappers' ability to trap and hunt (Daigle et al 1998).

Effects of Social Change

Trapping was a viable means of income for over 200 years; it is only in the past 30 years that it has begun to feel the effects of a failing market. The 1970's was an era of intense social pressure and change, some of which extended towards trapped fur. The intense pressure by activists caused wild fur trappers to lose 95% of their market to farmed and synthetic furs. Successful campaigns by those producing farmed fur created a painful and barbaric image of wild trapped furs. The director of the Wild Fur Shippers Association (2013) stated "they think we're just running through the woods with guns shooting anything that moves, they don't realize that trapping is highly ethical and regulated" (Wilkie Appendix 5). The market eventually crashed and prices for furs became unpredictable with some prices dropping over 50%.

Trapping has been met with huge opposition by lobbyist and animal rights groups. They view trapping as a barbaric practise that causes unnecessary pain and stress on animals. These organizations argue that policies regarding consumptive use of wild resources are made based on political motivations instead of science. A number of movements have been suggested to ban trapping methods and to ban trapping outright. In 1996, grass roots organizations successfully banned trapping in the state of Colorado (Cockrell 1999). The use of all fur, whether it be farmed or wild, has been banned in affluent districts such as West Hollywood and barred from runways in Norway (Kandel 2011 & StCry 2011). The opposition does not end there: recent advertisements promoting to eco friendliness of fur have been banned by the Advertising Standards Agency due to their supposed misleading information (Sweeney 2012).

Trappers have refused to sit idly by while their livelihoods are being eradicated due to social pressures. In response to the loss of the wild fur market the North American Fur Auctions Company created a branch known as the Wild Fur Shippers Association in the 1980's. They focus solely on the selling and promotion of wild trapped furs. This was a large investment for the group; 2012 is the first year since 1986 that they have had a complete sale and made a profit (Wilkie Appendix 5 2013). In order to reduce costs and create new products they created their own processing and design house in Toronto, Ontario. This facility is one of few that exist in the world. They recently launched a 500,000 dollar campaign to promote their newest line of dyed racoon furs; their designs were among some that I saw during my visit. The women appeared to respond positively to this new avenue while the men were not as impressed. This did not bother the representative as she stated "Small town people will never understand the furs, and that's fine. It's not small town people that market cares about; its big city people in places like Toronto and Europe" (Wilkie Appendix 5 2013).

There have been some successes in recent years for the wild trapped fur industry. The largest fur auction house in North America, the NAFA, recently had its first 100% fur sale since 1986. Over 700 buyers from a variety of countries attended, creating a record attendance record. The sale saw Chinese fur buyers become interested again in purchasing wild furs:

It was only a few years ago that China showed very limited interest in wild fur. Today, with the huge amount that NAFA has now cumulatively invested in wild fur promotion, this has all completely changed. We have to recognize that fur is in fashion in China, where up until now, ranch raised mink was their number one article (NAFA 2013).

The Chinese market is an important factor that was lost due to animal rights campaigns and the spread of fur farms (Wilkie Appendix 1 2013). Recently, a number of propaganda videos filmed

by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals are attempting to end farmed fur in China by showcasing the unethical treatment of these farmed animals. On top of a strong buyer interest, prices for some pelts skyrocketed; racoon saw an 80% jump in price (NAFA 2013). The industry believes this strong sale to be indicative of years to come.

Gender Segregation

Females are more likely to oppose trapping and the methods used to obtain wild fur bearing mammal pelts. Studies conducted by Muth and colleagues (2006) showed that out of the 46% of participants that opposed the use of leg hold traps 62% were women. Women were more likely to oppose the use of this method due to “emotional reasons” such as it causes unnecessary pain or stress and that there is a greater risk of catching non-target species. Men on the other hand were more likely to cite their support for reasons such as it is an efficient method of harvest and an important wild life management tool. They also noted that those who opposed leg hold traps (62% of women) generally oppose trapping in general and have no firsthand experience with it. However, is the opposition truly because women are more emotional or is it due to their lack of experience within the field?

Around the convention were a number of posters put up by the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters. These posters all featured females and had headings such as “wife, mother and hunter”. They seemed to contrast typically female characteristics such as mother hood with hunting culture by emphasizing the differences between the two. Only 3 articles out of over 20 in the bi annual trappers’ magazine alluded to females. One article was focused on traditional Inuit women’s role as pelt processors and a second spoke of how a mother stopped trapping to stay home and raise her children while her husband and male children continued trapping. When

asked what place women have in outdoor activities such as hunting and trapping Matt Wilkie (Appendix 1 2013) responded “Girls come out there and all they do is whine and complain. They complain about how they look, they complain about how hard the work is and, worst of all, they complain because you “shot bambi”. A number of informants however, spoke of women who are “one of the boys” and therefore more accepted into this culture.

Women were either noticeably absent or underrepresented in the research that I conducted. Most women that I observed at the Annual Trappers Convention were working behind booths taking orders from customers. The other women that I observed there were split into social groups sitting at the coffee area. As a woman, I felt hostility towards me by the older men at the convention. Many comments were made such as “where is your dad?” or “A pretty girl like you shouldn’t see something like this” (Wilkie 2013). At the awards ceremony on March 2nd 2013 I observed the trapping awards being handed out. Only one award was specifically designated for females: the best beaver prepared at home. In this category there was only 2 entrants, the first was an older female and the second was a youth girl. No females won in any of the other adult categories. In the youth categories however, best prepared by a youth under 12 and best prepared by a youth under 12 with an adult, were won by female youth. Only one male youth won third place.

While women may not be as visible as men in the trapping culture, their influence behind the scenes is overwhelming. As women are the driving force behind the fashion industry they exhibit a large amount of control over the market of furs. The processing and designing of furs is left to the females. The NAFA, in association with the Wild Fur Shippers Council, offers a yearly processing course in Toronto that is available only to women. This course is paid for in full by the NAFA and teaches sewing, dyeing and designing of wild caught furs over the course

of a week (Wilkie Appendix 4 2013). This provides women with their own place in the industry while excluding men. It becomes a reflection of societal views that place women as the gender responsible for creating while men are responsible for providing. The men that I witnessed however opposed the campaigns towards dyed fur and regarded them as “gross, weird... not right”. (Wilkie Appendix 4 2013).

Continuity and Attracting Youth

The average age of trappers is increasing as the number of active trappers’ decreases. The exact numbers are hard to track; however, Armstrong and Rossi (2000) recorded an apparent loss of 140,000 trappers over the course of just 3 years in the United States. Canadian participation reflects this trend as fewer and fewer license renewal applications are processed each year. A man at the skinning competition expressed worry that his adult children will choose to not continue trapping on his line once he passes away (Wilkie Appendix 6 2013). The lack of adults who participate in outdoor activities means that there is a shortage of adults who will teach their children to hunt or trap. Without an active mentor, many children will never learn the skills required for an active outdoors lifestyle.

Trapping has always been hard work and involves a high level of skill. It is not an activity that can be learnt over the course of a weekend course: trapping requires a mentor who can pass on their skills to the younger generation. The idea of a mentor is reflected in the legislation regarding trapping certification. After completing the Fur Harvest, Fur Management and Conservation Course a trapper is then required to act as a helper to an experienced trapper on their line. Only after this period with their mentor is a trapper considered certified and allowed to purchase his or her own trap line. Once the line is purchased, the trapper owns it until they

choose to put it up for sale. If they pass away it becomes part of the inheritance. On top of this, trappers must renew their license every year (Ministry of Natural Resources 2011).

The current economy has decreased the amount of financial return while increasing the cost of resources needed for trapping. Starting trapping kits are in the 500 dollars and up range; this does not include the necessary vehicles, such as snow machines or trucks, or the gas in which to run them. A raccoon trap is priced at around 35 dollars, yet the price of a raccoon pelt was only 16 dollars in 2011 (Trans Canada Trap Line 2012). Combine this with rising gas prices due to the Harmonized Sales Tax and the initial financial strain caused by trapping becomes evident. It can take many years in order for a trapper to become skilled in pelt preparation; during this time they may lose money due to poorly prepared pelts. Many trappers I had met previous to this all had second jobs that they did in the off-season in order to survive financially. This low economic return combined with an unpredictable market takes away the appeal that trapping may have to youth.

During my observations, I noted that there was an abundance of children who appeared to be participating in trapping. At the convention there was a number running around with skinned animals and they had two categories for youth prepared pelts. The excitement of these youth was obvious: they were jeering on adult competitors, competing on their own and “bugging” the director for more information on who had won the contests. Despite all this activity by children under 12 years of age, there were almost no teenagers or young adults. I only saw one teenage male who was disinterested and texting the entire time as his father went from booth to booth and one young adult who was there with his young daughter. This young adult was by far the youngest to compete in the trap setting competition. These two appeared to be outliers however as the general age of those attending the trapping convention was 40 and upwards.

The question remains: what happens to the apparently high number of youth that are involved at a young age? Many of the youth that I observed were female; in the youth awards young girls won first and second place in both categories. Cultural views as well as societal pressures appear to have a large influence on the continuity through youth. Women are expected to act in ways that reflect typical views on femininity; trapping is generally in opposition to these beliefs. Our current culture is also hugely focused on technology as a means of entertainment. Many of these technological advancements are geared towards children; toys such as X-Boxes and computers have caused children to spend less time outdoors. The trappers' general consensus on today's youth is that they are "lazy". Matt Wilkie (2013, Appendix 1) went so far as to say that "...youth... are important in the continuity of outdoor sports. Today's youth are so disconnected; they need to get in touch with something real."

Conclusion

The future of trapping is changing. Political activism by animal rights groups caused wild trapped fur to lose a substantial part of its market in the 1970-1980's. This allowed for farmed and synthetic furs to rise in popularity and dominate the market. This loss of the market has led to a decrease in income and interest in the traditional practise of wild fur trapping. Due to this, many trappers are in the lowest socio economic range of 10,000-50000 a year (Daigle et al 1998). Public opinion is proving hard to change as a number of districts and Fashion Week runways are lobbying to ban fur from their areas. Ads promoting the sustainability of furs have also been banned. There is evidence that this trend may be reversing in the years to come as prices are on the rise and buyers are becoming reinterested in purchasing wild furs.

The lack of female and youth involvement has become a larger issue as the number of active trappers greatly decreases. Women are still being limited to more traditional gender roles

as those who prepared and design pelts. Men are being excluded from this practise by organizations such as the NAFA; this is creating a disconnect from their work and a refusal to change their traditional ways. Youth involvement appears to drop sharply when children enter their teenage years. Entertainment technologies combined with an increasingly urban lifestyle means that the appeal of outdoor activities is lost on todays' youth. It also has led to a decline in mentors who can teach their children how to participate in these activities. If youth and women are not reintroduced to this culture in non-traditional ways, there is a chance of the industry dying out.

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