

INTRODUCTION

Correctly preparing pelts is essential to secure a top market price or to allow for successful tanning. If pelts are to be sold, it is simply good business to prepare them properly. Uniform preparation is an important consideration because pelts are graded by size, quality, and appearance. For those wishing to tan pelts for personal use, pelts must be prepared properly to facilitate a high-quality finished product, whether tanned at home or sent to a commercial tannery. This publication presents procedures and techniques for skinning animals and preparing the pelts for sale or tanning. If you intend to sell your pelts, it is best to check periodically with an established fur buyer for preferred methods of skinning and handling since these may change. Similarly, you should check with the tannery you plan to send pelts to if having them tanned commercially.

Most furbearing animals alternate between winter and summer coats. Winter coats provide the animal with added protection from the elements and are thicker and fuller than summer coats. Therefore, the most valuable furs are taken during the colder months. The winter coats of younger animals become prime (fully developed guard hair and underfur) earlier in the fall than those of older animals. The time frame of when a pelt is most marketable varies with species of animal, climate, region, and market conditions. However, most furs are thick and marketable by early December even though they may not be fully prime.

Fox and coyote pelts begin to drop in quality and appearance during the breeding season, which is usually from late January through February in New Mexico. Bobcat pelts are often prime as late

as April, but condition of fur varies considerably by individual.

Before harvesting any furbearing animal, it is your legal responsibility to know and understand all state rules and regulations regarding harvest, possession, and trade or sale of furbearing animals and their pelts. In New Mexico, a furbearer license is required for residents age 12 and older and all nonresidents to hunt, trap, or possess protected furbearers. Protected furbearers (raccoon, badger, weasel, fox, ringtail, bobcat, beaver, muskrat, and nutria) can be harvested only during furbearer season. It is illegal to take black-footed ferret, coati-mundi, pine marten, and river otter in New Mexico. Nonresidents also must have a license to harvest unprotected furbearers (skunk and coyote). When using traps to harvest furbearing animals, a Trapper ID number is required. This ID number is provided free by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF) and can be obtained by calling 505-476-8038. All bobcat pelts are subject to special tagging requirements and must be presented to a licensed fur dealer or any NMDGF office within 30 days of harvest for tagging. It is illegal to transport across state lines, barter, sell, or otherwise dispose of any bobcat pelt taken in New Mexico unless it is properly tagged. Furbearers other than bobcat are not subject to the special tagging requirements.

The NMDGF annually publishes rules, regulations, and season dates for hunting and trapping furbearers in the *New Mexico Big-Game & Furbearer Rules & Information*. This booklet is available where New Mexico hunting licenses are sold or online at www.wildlife.state.nm.us. Always stay up to date with the most recent booklet because seasons and regulations may change periodically. For

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further information, you can contact the NMDGF state office by phone at 505-476-8000.

SKINNING

Many pelts are ruined by waiting too long between harvest and skinning of the animal. Warm weather can cause pelts to “taint” (early stages of decay) and hair to “slip” (loosen or fall out) within an hour after death, particularly if they are exposed to direct sunlight. Therefore, animals should be skinned as soon as possible to prevent degradation or loss of pelts, especially when temperatures are above freezing.

Furbearing animals are skinned either “open” or “cased.” Example locations of the cuts for these two methods are shown in Figure 1. In the open method, pelts are removed by cutting the skin up the belly from the vent to the chin, then peeling it away from the underlying tissue. Cased pelts are removed by cutting the skin up the back of the hind legs from the feet to the vent. The pelt is peeled back and removed much like removing a pullover sweater. Feet, claws, and tail are removed on some pelts and left attached on others, depending on species. On some, the tail is split on the underside. Buyers, in general, agree on some techniques. Beavers are traditionally skinned open and stretched into a round shape with the feet and tail removed, but the legs are not split. Badgers and raccoons may be skinned open or cased, but check with your buyer to see what he or she prefers. Muskrats are skinned cased and stretched skin side out. Coyotes, foxes, and bobcats should be cased and dried fur side out.

Fur color and quality are two reasons for the varied way pelts are sold. Furs such as muskrat carry the same color throughout the pelt, and the color can be observed on the rump of the pelt. Coyote, fox, and bobcat furs may vary widely in color throughout the pelt, and since color is important in pelt value, these pelts are sold fur side out. Some buyers prefer to have the claws left on larger bobcat pelts so they can be mounted as trophies or made into rugs.

Although a knife is needed for only a few cuts on most pelts, those cuts will be much easier if the knife is very sharp. When cutting through hide, cut from the skin side whenever possible, as cutting through hair will quickly dull the knife and make it

difficult to achieve a clean cut. Keep knives sharp, but be careful not to accidentally damage the hide when skinning.

Caution must be exercised while skinning and handling any furbearing animal since they can carry diseases transmissible to humans. Plague, tularemia, and leptospirosis have been acquired in the handling and skinning of furbearing animals. Other diseases, such as rabies, can also be acquired through open cuts or wounds. Some general precautions that should be taken to reduce risks of exposure and prevent infection are:

1. Wear protective clothing, including plastic, rubber, or latex gloves, when skinning or fleshing.
2. Scrub the work area, knives, other tools, and reusable gloves with soap or detergent followed by disinfection with diluted household bleach.
3. Avoid eating and drinking while handling or skinning animals, and wash hands thoroughly when finished.
4. Safely dispose of carcasses and tissues as well as any contaminated disposable items such as latex gloves.
5. Contact a physician if you become sick following exposure to a wild animal or its ectoparasites (e.g., ticks and fleas). Inform the physician of your possible exposure to a wildlife-carried disease.

Skinning Beavers

To skin a beaver, make a single slit from the base of the tail straight through the vent to the tip of the lower jaw (Figure 1). Be careful not to cut into the body cavity or damage the castor glands on either side of the vent. Cut the feet and tail from the carcass at the hair-line. Because a beaver's skin is secured firmly to the body by muscle and gristle, you will need to use a knife to free it from the body as you peel it away. Begin skinning along the initial incision and work toward the back. When skinning the legs, simply work the pelt over the stump of each leg without cutting through the hide. With experience, you may find that leaving considerable amounts of flesh on the hide will make it easier to do a neat fleshing job later on. Meat left on the

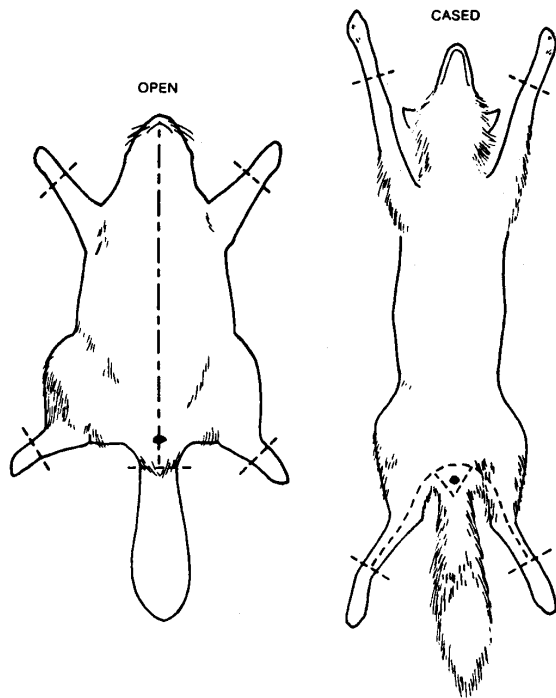


Figure 1. Skinning cuts on open and cased pelts.

hide can provide material to hold onto while fleshing a slippery beaver pelt.

Skinning Coyotes, Foxes, and Bobcats

Coyotes, foxes, and bobcats are not difficult to skin and are among the most commonly sold pelts. Skinning is usually easiest if the animal is hung by the tendons of the hind legs at shoulder height. A short rope with a harness snap attached to each end and thrown over a beam is a simple, effective method of hanging the animal. Instead of hanging the animal, some skimmers prefer to anchor the rope to the bumper of a vehicle.

To skin a coyote, fox, or bobcat for commercial sale, cut the skin from the rear pad of one hind foot up the back of the leg to the base of the tail, and continue down the other leg to the rear pad of the other hind foot. There is a fairly distinct change in color between the fur on the inner and outer surface of the hind legs. The skinning cuts should follow this color-transition line as closely as possible when cutting along the back of the leg. Make a short cut across on the belly side of the vent to leave a small triangle of skin, including the vent, on

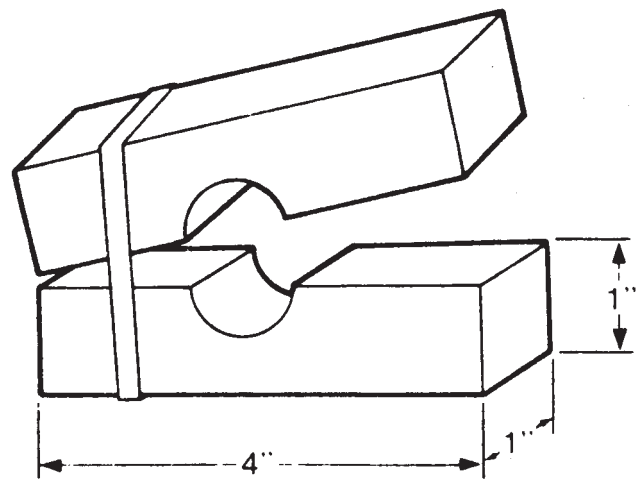


Figure 2. Wooden boning tool.

the carcass. Cut around all four legs just above the feet (except when fur buyers want feet and claws left attached) and work the pelt away from the hind legs and tail. The tailbone can be pulled out by hand or by gripping the tailbone loosely with a pair of pliers, but a small wooden boning tool (Figure 2) may be helpful. Figure 3 demonstrates the use of a boning tool.

A knife is usually needed only for beginning cuts and skinning around the head because pelts can be pulled off easily. Pull the pelt down over the body, the shoulders, and the front legs to the ears. Cut the ear cartilage off next to the skull, and carefully skin out the rest of the head. Be particularly careful to avoid cutting holes near the eyes and lips. Leave the nose and lips attached to the pelt.

Take extreme care when skinning around an area where a bullet or shot entered or left the body. Bullet holes (or holes made accidentally while skinning) should be sewn shut before final stretching. Dental floss or fishing line can be used as thread. Be sure the hole is sewn so there are no bulges and so colors on the fur side are properly matched. The fur of pelts should be brushed clean either before or after skinning. A horse brush or household scrubbing brush works well for this. Washing may be necessary to remove blood and other foreign material. A high-pressure stream from a garden hose works well. The fur side of the pelts should be allowed to dry before being stretched, as they may

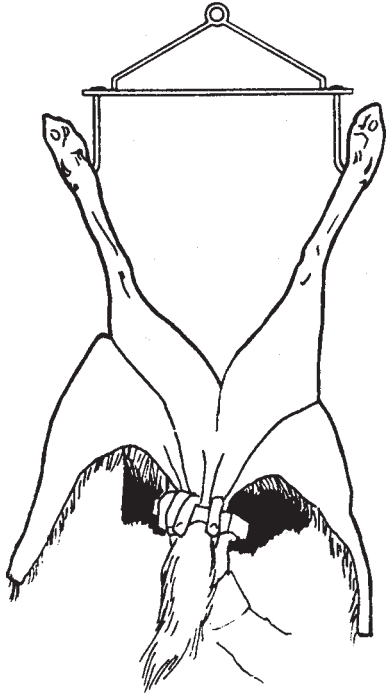


Figure 3. Skinning tail with boning tool.

spoil if stretched while wet. This is especially true for cased pelts because the fur side receives little ventilation in the first stages of stretching.

FLESHING

Pelts are normally fleshed on a fleshing board, fleshing beam, or stretcher, depending on species and personal preference. A fleshing board is flat, while a fleshing beam is rounded. Both have tapered points and make fleshing easier by providing a solid base to secure the pelt to for scraping and cutting flesh away from the hide. Stretchers, although made for drying pelts, can be used for fleshing some animals by holding the hide taut while flesh is cut away.

Fleshing boards, fleshing beams, and stretchers can be made at home, but beginners may find it easier to purchase one. A wide selection is available commercially through trapping or taxidermy suppliers. These suppliers usually offer a variety of fleshing knives and tools as well. Although a simple knife may work for some fleshing jobs, it may be much easier to use a knife or tool specifically designed for fleshing. If using a fleshing beam, you

should use a fleshing knife that is rounded to approximately the same degree as the beam. By any method, fleshing should remove all possible flesh from the hide before stretching.

Coyote, fox, and bobcat pelts usually require very little fleshing and can be fleshed quite easily on a stretcher. Remove excess tissue and fat by cutting, scraping, or pulling it away, being careful to avoid damage to the skin. Beaver pelts are typically fleshed on fleshing beams, and secured to the beam by clamping the edges of the pelt together under the beam. A two-handed fleshing knife is typically used for beaver because they have a heavy layer of fat and are generally difficult to flesh. Push the fleshing knife away from your body, working from the head of the beaver downward. Scrape as much fat and other flesh as possible away from the hide.

Cornmeal or sawdust rubbed into the flesh side of the pelt and brushed off helps remove oil and fat. This helps prevent grease burn and aids in uniform drying. Flesh and other tissue left on the skin can retain moisture and harbor bacteria, leading to spoiling of the pelt later on.

If pelts are to be tanned at home, the fleshing should be particularly thorough. Commercial tanneries will flesh pelts for you, but pelts must still be cured and fleshed well enough to prevent spoiling before reaching the tannery. Some tanneries may offer discounts if the pelt has been fully fleshed, but check with the tannery first.

After skinning and fleshing, the hide is ready to be cured. Curing can be done by stretching (air drying) or salt curing. The stretching method described below is for pelts that are to be sold commercially. Salt curing should be done if the pelt is to be tanned. Along with procedures for home tanning, salt curing is described in Cooperative Extension Service Guide L-103, *Tanning Deer Hides and Small Fur Skins*. (aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/_l/l-103.pdf)

STRETCHING

For beaver, stretching may be done on a specialized frame, a large board such as a half sheet of plywood, or on an inside wall if in a cool, dry area. The round appearance of prepared beaver pelts is achieved by stretching, not skinning. To stretch a beaver pelt on a board or wall, drive four nails through the edge of the head or upper part of the

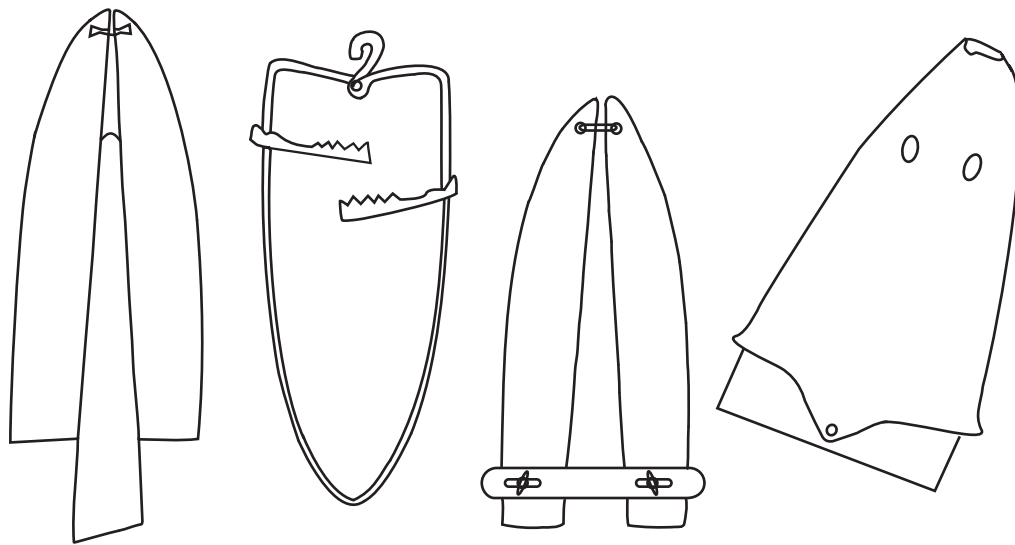


Figure 4. Muskrat stretching frames.

pelt about one-inch apart. Stretch the pelt lengthwise as tight as possible and drive several tacks along the bottom edge. Stretch one side of the pelt out horizontally and tack it down, then stretch the other side tight and tack it down. Stretch and tack the remaining edge of the hide so that it is as close as possible to the shape of a perfect circle, maintaining tautness throughout without overstretching.

As a general rule, cased pelts should be stretched to approximately the same length and width proportions as those of the live animal. Pelts stretched this way are rather long and narrow, the shape preferred in the fur trade. Pelts should be stretched to approximately the same width at the shoulders and hips. Therefore, stretcher shape and size are important.

The pelt is now ready for partial drying. Pelts that are to be sold skin side out can be left in this position to dry thoroughly. Because coyote, fox and bobcat pelts are sold with the fur side out, they must be turned before becoming too dry and brittle. Leave the pelt stretched, skin side out, until the flesh has a glazed appearance and is no longer sticky, but still somewhat soft and flexible (time required varies with temperature and humidity but generally takes about 4 to 6 hours at room temperature). Then reverse the pelt so the fur side is out.

If pelts are not at least partially dried with the flesh side out, they tend to stick to the stretcher

and are often badly torn during removal. This is a much greater problem if the stretcher is made from a single solid board, which is not adjustable. In addition, pelts can spoil due to inadequate air circulation and slow drying during warm and wet weather if they are not partially dried with the flesh side out first.

The hide should be tacked at one-inch intervals all the way around. It may help to draw a circle on the board a little larger than the pelt to serve as a guide for stretching. Some of the remaining grease may be removed by scraping after the stretching has been completed. Beaver pelts should remain stretched until fully dry, usually taking about one week.

Cased pelts can be stretched using wire or wooden stretchers. An assortment of muskrat stretchers are shown in Figure 4 as an example of the different types of stretchers available commercially. Stretchers for other species differ in size and shape. Wire stretchers have the advantage of being easy to use because the hide is easily attached and there is little danger of overstretching. It is wise to rub the stretcher with wax before using to prevent the flesh of the pelt from sticking. This is especially important with thin-skinned animals, such as fox. Wooden stretchers can be purchased or made at home.

Figure 5 provides an example layout for a homemade, adjustable wooden stretcher. The smaller stretcher is sized for fox and bobcat pelts while the larger is for coyotes.

Coyote, fox, and bobcat pelts should initially be stretched skin side out. When using adjustable wooden stretchers (Figure 5 and similarly designed stretchers), stretching is done in ordered steps: (1) A small nail on the end of the stretcher holds the nose in place. (2) Pull the hind legs down moderately and tack them to the stretcher legs. (3) Pull the lower lip toward the nose and tack it in place. (4) Loosen the wing nut on the cross-bar and slide the stretcher legs apart enough to remove wrinkles in the pelt. (5) Tighten the wing nut to hold the stretcher legs in place, but do not overstretch the pelt since this tends to thin the fur and decrease pelt value.

To turn pelts, remove them from the stretcher, and begin turning them at the open end, working toward the head. If a pelt is not too dry and fragile, it is possible to reach through the open end, grasp the nose, and turn the fur side out like turning a sock. The front legs should also be turned and will then dry more thoroughly if cardboard or paper is rolled and placed into them.

After the pelt is turned, the hind legs and lower lip should again be stretched moderately and tacked in place and the stretcher legs moved out to remove all slack in the pelt. Inserting a one-inch thick piece of wood into the pelt between the stretcher legs will improve airflow. If using a solid wooden stretcher, you should insert a long, thin wooden wedge between the stretcher and the front side of the hide (after dry, removing the wedge first will provide some slack for easier removal of the pelt). The tips of the ears can be pulled forward and tacked down to provide a more uniform appearance. This also makes dry pelts easier to pack in bales. Pelts should be allowed to dry thoroughly before being removed from the stretcher. This may take several days if the weather is cool and damp. Some people prefer to

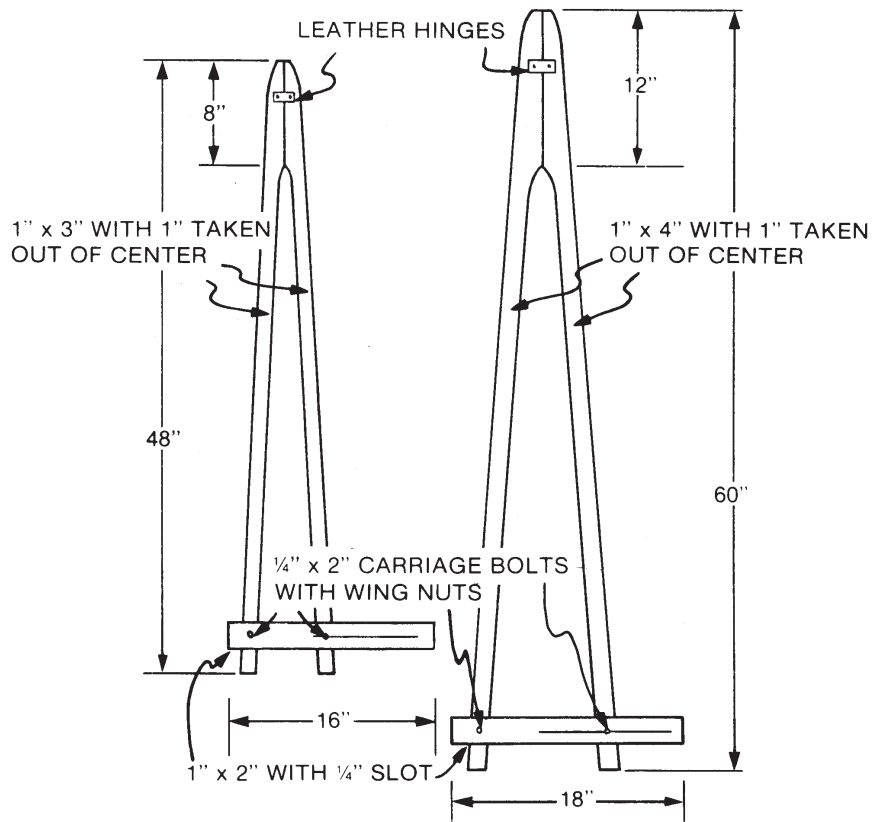


Figure 5. Adjustable wooden stretchers. Use finished (smooth) boards.

hang pelts nose side down to dry. This causes the hairs to dry in a more upright position and will make the fur look thicker.

STORING AND SHIPPING PELTS

When dry, pelts can be removed from the stretcher, brushed again to improve appearance, and hung by the nose in a cool, dry place. They should be stored where they will not be exposed to sunlight or direct heat. Also, dried pelts should not be folded because they are brittle and will break or tear easily.

Many pelts are sold locally, but it may be necessary or desirable to ship them to buyers, auctions, or tanneries in other locations. Shipping permits are not required in New Mexico, but remember to have bobcat pelts properly tagged (as required by NMDGF) before shipping. Additionally, you should check shipping regulations for the state to which you are shipping pelts. Check with a U.S. Customs official before shipping internationally because special regulations apply.

When shipping pelts, do not wrap them heavily with paper since they may heat and spoil. They should be rolled loosely or stacked fur to fur and skin to skin. Pelts can be shipped in a cardboard carton containing holes for ventilation or in a burlap bag. It is best to check first with the buyer, auction, or tannery for their preferred method of shipping. If held for long periods, pelts may spoil or be damaged by mice, rats, and insects. As a general rule, it is best to sell pelts during the same season in which they are taken.

MARKETING PELTS

In New Mexico, most pelts sold by trappers or hunters have traditionally been bought by either a resident or traveling fur buyer. Finding a reputable, established fur buyer will help you to secure a fair price for pelts. You may want to check with local trappers, taxidermists, game wardens, or sporting goods stores since they will usually know if there are fur buyers in your area. Because fur dealers are required to be licensed when operating in New Mexico, the NMDGF can provide a list of currently licensed New Mexico fur dealers. To request a copy of this list, call the NMDGF, Special Permits Section, at 505-476-8064.

Local fur buyers may be hard to find or not available in your area, but there are other ways to sell pelts. Some fur buying companies will advertise in trapping or sportsmen-oriented magazines and will buy pelts through the mail. For those willing to pay a small commission fee, pelts may also be sold at auctions sponsored by trapping associations or private fur companies. These auctions are sometimes advertised in trapping magazines or through trappers associations. Although there are several ways to sell pelts, utilizing a reputable local fur buyer offers the advantage of establishing a direct relationship with the buyer. A local buyer can offer tips and keep you up to date on preferred methods of pelt preparation.

Prices paid for pelts vary by method of sale, region, market conditions, and grade of pelt. Prices vary by region within New Mexico, primarily because of differences in the natural pelt quality. Besides natural variability, the quality and value

of pelts are dependent largely upon their preparation. Beginners will likely make mistakes, but with experience, it will become easier to produce pelts capable of securing top market prices.

A FEW WORDS ON FUR HARVEST

Since prehistoric times, humans have harvested furbearers for food and clothing (subsistence) or population control (management). The search for fur was the basis for much of the exploration of the American West. Relatively few people depend upon wild fur as their sole means of support today, but many rely upon sustainable harvest of furbearers to supplement their income. Others simply want to enjoy, use, or display a tanned pelt of a furbearer they have harvested themselves. Additionally, those with a need to implement animal damage control programs (such as harvesting beavers that are disrupting private waterways) may offset some of the program costs by correctly preparing and marketing the pelts of harvested furbearers. Well-regulated hunting and trapping provide pleasurable and profitable means of using a renewable natural resource.

Furbearer management includes elements of sustainable use, population control, and habitat. So long as sufficient habitat exists, harvest of many furbearer species can be used by managers to maintain populations at sustainable and productive levels. Wildlife managers are broadly trained biologists with a background in the basic sciences, botany, soils, ecology, and economics. Their decisions must be based on the best available information. If the resource is to be maintained for the use and enjoyment of future generations, management decisions cannot be based on whim, political expediency, or emotionalism.

One emotion-inspired argument against the harvest of furbearers has been its alleged cruelty. Much of that "cruelty" stems from erroneous portrayals of trappers and hunters as callous, blood-thirsty, and greedy. However, this negative image is perpetuated by a very small number of trappers or hunters who are inconsiderate toward regulations and ethics of harvest. Trappers and hunters should strive to harvest furbearers in a humane fashion while being considerate toward the environment,

wildlife habitat, nontarget wildlife, human safety, private property rights, other trappers and hunters, and other uses of our natural resources. *The Hunter's Guide*, published by the National Rifle Association, and the *Trapping Handbook*, published by the National Trappers Association, describe standards of conduct that hunters and trappers should follow. Practicing and promoting ethical harvest within the framework of state regulations can help advance wildlife management strategies and alleviate some of the misconceptions about fur harvest.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A portion of the material in this publication was adopted from the New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension Service Circular C-490, *Fur Harvest and Pelt Preparation* (no longer in circulation). The authors would like to thank Jeff Lehmer, the New Mexico Trappers Association, and Bill Dunn of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, for reviewing this publication.

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