

H.172 Public Comment
House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife

From: Dave Furman

Sent: Friday, April 2, 2021 3:13 PM

To: House Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife Committee

Subject: NO on H.172 and H.316

Dear Madame speaker, members of the House Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife committee, and my local representatives,

I am writing to express my disappointment with both the content of these two bills, as well as my perception of the timing and tactics used to move them ahead this session. I have provided more detailed notes below my email to illustrate these points. I hope you will do the right thing by not advancing either of these bills.

H.172 is a total ban on trapping as we know it, as well as a total ban on using dogs to hunt bear. H.316 would establish an impossible set of criteria for hunting bear with dogs, which is also de facto total ban on the activity. I oppose these two bills for the following reasons:

- The bills ignore the individual as well as the societal benefit of the state managing wildlife populations in trust for its citizens.
- With respect both to trapping and bear hunting, both bills will potentially hurt wildlife populations of both game and non-game species as well as the overall conservation effort in Vermont that all of us benefit from.
- The bills make arbitrary distinctions and lack clarity
- The bills are not based on a foundation of science or data

For these reasons H.172 and H.316 will be detrimental to both the wildlife and habitat of the state that we all value, and for its citizens who value their connection to the land that is derived from hunting, angling, and trapping.

Finally, the last-minute timing during the legislative session and lopsided testimony in advancing these bills during the pandemic when citizen participation is especially difficult is unacceptable. Both of these bills target niche yet important activities within hunting, fishing and trapping, but both have significant implications beyond just those Vermonters who participate in trapping or hunt bear with hounds. The precedents set here and the resulting ease of targeting the next group of hunters or anglers (collectively almost 20% of the population, making these among the most popular outdoor activities in the state), as well as the roadblocks to utilizing the North American Model to continue facilitating overall conservation of both game and non-game species and general economic activity, means all Vermonters lose if these bills pass. Regardless of how one feels about the content of these bills it is undeniable they will negatively impact a sizable swath of Vermonters and so they deserve an exceptionally high level of public discourse and scrutiny and a highly robust public process. To bring these bills up at this late stage in the

(remote) session with what at the moment appears to be highly lopsided scheduled testimony is simply not acceptable.

Thank you very much for thoroughly considering my feedback.

Sincerely,
David Furman
Jericho, VT

Specific notes:

Both bills ignore the societal benefit of the state managing wildlife in trust for its citizens. Since the early 20th century the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation has successfully used regulated hunting, fishing and trapping as a primary management tool and funding source. 100 years ago deer, turkeys and other now-common animals were nearly extirpated from Vermont due to habitat loss and unregulated market-hunting. The collection of laws and policies we call the North American Model has resulted in the recovery and now abundance of wildlife we see around us today. Hunting, angling and trapping are not the only source of conservation work or funding today, but this recovery success story was facilitated to a great extent, and will continue to be significantly funded and implemented in the future, by hunters, anglers and trappers. These activities are also the foundation of many Vermonters' culture and traditions tangibly connecting people and families to the natural world. They also are utilized by scientists and the state agencies charged with maintaining and enhancing our habitats and wildlife populations, including significantly for non-game-related habitat, animals and activities. Regardless of whether one chooses to participate in hunting, trapping or angling, all Vermonters who care about healthy wildlife populations and the habitat needed to support them, benefit from these activities.

The ban or de facto ban on using hounds to hunt bear, as proposed in both h172 and in h316, will eliminate an essential tool currently used to manage our bear population, increasing the likelihood of human/bear conflicts, and it is also not rooted in data or science.

- Human/bear conflict is increasing in Vermont. From 2002 to 2019 the incidence of reported human/bear conflict increased almost 400% according to the VT Department of Fish and Wildlife (VTFW). At the same time the bear population is stable, so the loss of an important population management tool will only make the increase in problems worse.
- Banning bear hunting with dogs removes one of the most effective tools the state has to study and manage the bear population.
- Removing one of the most effective bear hunting methods results in removing one of the most effective ways to procure this prized game meat. Contrary to common myth, when properly prepared bear meat tastes good! It is also healthy, sustainably harvested, carbon-neutral food.

- Banning dogs for hunting or training for hunting bears removes the primary tool for aversive conditioning, which helps prevent lethal means from being necessary for bears that otherwise become habituated to living around people.
- Limiting the use of hounds for hunting will negatively impact the overall health of the entire bear population where habitat capacity is reached due to encroaching development or other reasons.
- Hunting bears with hounds is already highly regulated, requiring a special license and is only allowed in specific seasons, which are designed to maintain the bear population within a scientifically and socially determined population level.
- Hounds, like many other hunting dogs such as beagles used to hunt rabbits and pointing dogs bred to hunt game birds, have been bred for hundreds of years to find game away from their handler. These dogs find scent and follow it, which necessitates being some distance from the handler. Especially due to the often-heavy vegetation in Vermont, it is impossible to maintain visual contact with a dog at all times at even short distances. Mandating visual contact and voice control on a hound pursuing a bear (or a rabbit, etc) is simply not possible, and in effect is a total ban on the activity.
- Harm to pets, livestock or people is exceptionally rare. Hunting with hounds is safe. According to a 2019 systematic review published in the International Journal of Pediatric Otorhinolaryngology, there is no type of hound listed as a source of bites, nor do hounds show up in any list of dangerous dogs I could find. If managing the impact of dogs on landowners or other outdoor recreationists is the goal, other means that apply evenly to all dogs regardless of the situation should be utilized, rather than arbitrarily targeting one specific population without data to justify it. Personally, as a hunting dog owner, I would be far more worried about a neighbors' golden retriever wandering into my yard than I would be about any hunting dog.

The “nuisance trapping” system proposed in H.172 will end a long-standing tradition and way of life in VT. The legislation would also prevent the successful role citizen trappers play in minimizing predation on threatened species by predators that have become overabundant through habitat disturbance from human development. As a result, H.172 is likely to create unintended conservation problems, while simultaneously saddling conservation managers and landowners with a cumbersome, financially burdensome and culturally insensitive policy that reduces overall value and promotes the waste of a resource. Without solid scientific data to support the removal of this tool, h.172 should be opposed.

- H172 is ambiguous--it does not clarify what “conditions and methods approved for lethal control of nuisance wildlife” are.
- It uses euthanasia guidelines for pets, livestock, zoo animals, or situations such as an animal hit by a car. Even the referenced document says field conditions often mandate other techniques since euthanasia drugs have dangerous implications for other wildlife that might ingest them from parts of a carcass.

- H.172 only allows taking nuisance animals when literally “caught in the act” of damaging crops or attacking a pet or livestock. This will have the effect of not only increasing human/wildlife conflict, but it will make protecting crops or property more difficult and expensive, and potentially impossible, for a landowner, farmer or gardener.
- Trapping is a conservation tool to manage the populations of predators and other animals, and to gain important population data. In addition, trapping is an important management tool to facilitate recovery or reintroduction of threatened species such as the Spiny Softshell Turtle on Lake Champlain. Predator species that thrive in human-altered areas above what the surrounding habitat can support can lead to unsustainable levels of predation of other animals such as on eggs of ground-nesting birds. Trapping plays a successful role in balancing this human-caused disturbance.
- Trapping is supported by many conservation organizations. Apart from fish and wildlife agencies and interest groups, trapping is supported by groups such as The Wildlife Society, The American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians, and others.
- Trappers utilize their catch, either for fur or hide for the highly regulated fur trade or to make clothing, or for meat. Hide and fur is a sustainable and environmentally sound source for this utilization compared to the footprint of modern commercially produced and often oil-dependent apparel and food. Trappers also routinely eat meat from species such as Beaver.
- Trapping is highly regulated, requiring an instructional course, a yearly license, a separate license to deal in furs, and requires the reporting of all animals taken, including by-catch. An additional mandatory in-person inspection and tagging of certain pelts with the carcass given to VTFW for research, allows valuable data to be collected on the health and populations of these species, information that would not be available otherwise.
- Trapping regulations ensure targeted animal populations remain at healthy levels. Furbearers are only allowed to be trapped during very specific seasons, with only a few species with stable or rising populations able to sustainably support a longer season. In all cases, trapping requires landowner permission, mandates visible marking of traps and mandates daily checks. The strict rules surrounding trapping also ensure that incidental catches or injuries such as to pets or non-targeted species are a true rarity.
- Steel-jawed, toothed traps pictured in anti-trapping propaganda have been illegal to use for many, many years. The best-practices for traps and trapping have been continuously improved with the aid of wildlife managers and veterinarians, to reduce by-catch of unintended species to an absolute minimum, to ensure that foot hold traps minimize or eliminate injury, and to ensure lethal traps kill in the quickest and most humane way possible. Some animals are even trapped and released unharmed by biologists for re-introduction in other areas using the same traps used by trappers for fur, hide or meat. In fact, trappers regularly release unharmed animals which may be small or undesirable due to pelt condition.
- Trapping seasons are primarily in the Fall when animal pelts can best be utilized for fur. If all trapping moves to the “nuisance” system, animals trapped will not be utilized for fur. This will result in more waste compared to the current system where

populations are managed during the season when the furs are at their highest quality.

- H172 eliminates the youth trapping license, consequentially eliminating the generational transfer of culture and tradition associated with this activity. The ancestral skills and knowledge associated with trapping directly correlate to a strong connection to the natural landscape and a conservation ethic. Halting this would further disconnect youth from hands on, purposeful opportunities to develop a strong environmental ethic.

From: Ethan Dreissigacker
Sent: Friday, April 2, 2021 10:02 PM
To: House Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife
Subject: Concerns with H.172 and H.316

Hello,

I am writing to express my concern with the proposed bills H.172 and H.316.

Collectively these bills aim to ban trapping, and effectively ban the use of dogs for bear hunting. It's important to realize that banning the use of dogs in bear hunting will effectively eliminate bear hunting as an effective strategy for maintaining a balanced human-bear relationship on our landscape.

Vermont has a thriving bear population, and yet a surprisingly low level of human-bear conflict. The reason for this is in large part because we have a long and very inefficient bear hunting season during which people use hounds. When people hunt bears with hounds, they are able to be selective as to which bears they kill--the result is a lot more bears coming away alive and educated about the dangers of human interaction than killed.

I know that some people (including myself) in our local area have had negative experiences with some bear hounds--people, I think it's important to realize that like any community, there are bad apples, but we shouldn't make knee-jerk reactions to these situations that will create actual problems down the road. In the end, we all take for granted the fact that these folks get out and hunt bears, because they ultimately make it possible for the maximum number of bears to live on this landscape with us without conflict.

H. 316 directly addresses the use of dogs in bear hunting, calling for bear hunting dogs to be "under visual contact" at all times. It appears that this bill was either 1.) written without an understanding of how bear hunting with dogs works, or perhaps more likely 2.) is primarily aimed to end bear hunting with dogs, and probably bear hunting all together. This bill seems likely to be an attempt at leveraging the highly publicized "bear hound attack" on a hiker in 2019. If this bill is about public safety, it should propose restrictions on all dogs. My mom got bit twice by a dog just last week while out jogging on a public road. It wasn't a bear hunting dog, and it was in "visual contact" with its owner. I'm sure this happens daily throughout the state, and has absolutely nothing to do with bear hunting, or any kind of hunting for that matter. There are bad dogs everywhere and, not unlike people, even good dogs can behave unpredictably at times.

In addition to banning the use of bear hounds, H. 172 also aims to ban the trapping of animals by licensed trappers and replace it with a nuisance trapping system. Trapping is already highly regulated, with trappers needing to take an additional instructional and safety course, purchase a separate trapping license, and adhere to strict and scientifically based rules and regulations. The data reported by trappers and collected by the state provides valuable information on populations and health of these animals--information that

in some cases can't be collected by other means (Biologists all over the world use the same kinds of traps to conduct research). Most, if not all, trappers use at least the furs and/or the meat from what they catch. Conversely, paid nuisance trappers rarely use what they catch, and in many cases the “humane euthanasia” requirements proposed by this bill would actually prevent the use of the animal. The bottom line here is that trapping just really isn't the problem that some people make it out to be. It's a tradition of close interaction with (and study of) our natural community and landscape that has already been regulated to a sustainable level.

We are lucky to live in a state that is still legitimately rural in many places. This beautiful working landscape provides us with the opportunity to directly interact with the natural resources that support life, and the traditions of this interaction are important--they are the original human experiences that so many people have given up and lost connection with. These traditions are deeply intertwined with the physical landscape itself. I fear that if hunting and trapping die, so will this amazing landscape they require. Bear hunting with hounds and trapping in particular both represent traditions that require larger tracts of contiguous forest and undeveloped land to work well. These things appearing on the chopping block should be another canary in the coal mine for the future of the Vermont landscape we all love.

-Ethan Dreissigacker

From: Kyle Lapointe
Sent: Tuesday, April 6, 2021 10:44 AM
To: House Natural Resources Fish and Wildlife
Subject: H.172

Greetings,

I am writing to you now in opposition to the bill H.172. I urge you to oppose this bill as it would destroy an already heavily regulated, and scientifically proven furbearer management method used by many state, federal and tribal agencies. Additionally, the harvest of furbearers provides many benefits to those who trap through the use of the tanned furs for making articles of clothing and in many cases meat for our families.

However, today I wanted to share with you how trapping has been a part of my family. I moved to Vermont 15 years ago and started hunting as a source of lean healthy meat for my family and to spend even more time in the wilderness. Yes, I did not grow up hunting, and even was opposed to it for the bulk of my childhood based on what I thought hunting was from rumors and hearsay. I've since joined conservation organizations to help improve both our state and federally managed lands for us ALL to enjoy. I recently have started helping introduce other adults to hunting who are interested in providing healthy meat to their families. Talk about a local and minimal impact method for sourcing protein.

Three years ago, my son expressed an interest in trapping and we signed up for a state sponsored trappers education course. We made a camping trip out of the course as it was held in the NEK and we live in southern Vermont. The course was a great time, and both enjoyed learning about trapping, techniques used and Best Management Practices (BMP) criteria for traps. We spent the next year learning by reading, watching set methods from successful trappers, and preparing traps for this past year. COVID-19 made an easy decision to homeschool our children for the year and make time to enjoy the wonderful outdoor opportunities our state offers. Trapping has made it into their homeschool education and taught them more about wildlife ecology, animals and their habitats than any other course I can think of, all while enjoying the outdoors (and off electronics). We will be making beaver fur hats and mittens to keep us warm for next winter when our furs come back from the tannery and use the meat as a beef substitute for dishes like Shepherd's pie.

Additionally, this bill will further divide Vermonters in a time when our moto of Freedom and Unity couldn't be needed more to help lead our nation to once again be a united society.

I'll end this letter by asking all of you to take the time to consider H.172 as legislation that is bad for Vermont, Vermonters, and our wildlife. I encourage all of you to reach out to a local trapper and ask to tag along someday, you're certainly invited to come with me. For those whose minds I'll never change I wish you all the best and hope we can share an outdoor activity in the future we can agree upon.

Here is a link for more information: <https://www.fishwildlife.org/afwa-inspires/furbearer-management>

All my best,

Kyle Lapointe a father, husband, gardener, fly-fisherman, hunter, trapper, skier, mountain biker, IPA lover (because we have the best), paddler, wilderness lover, healthcare worker, and overall a Vermonter.