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ALASKA'S WILDLIFE

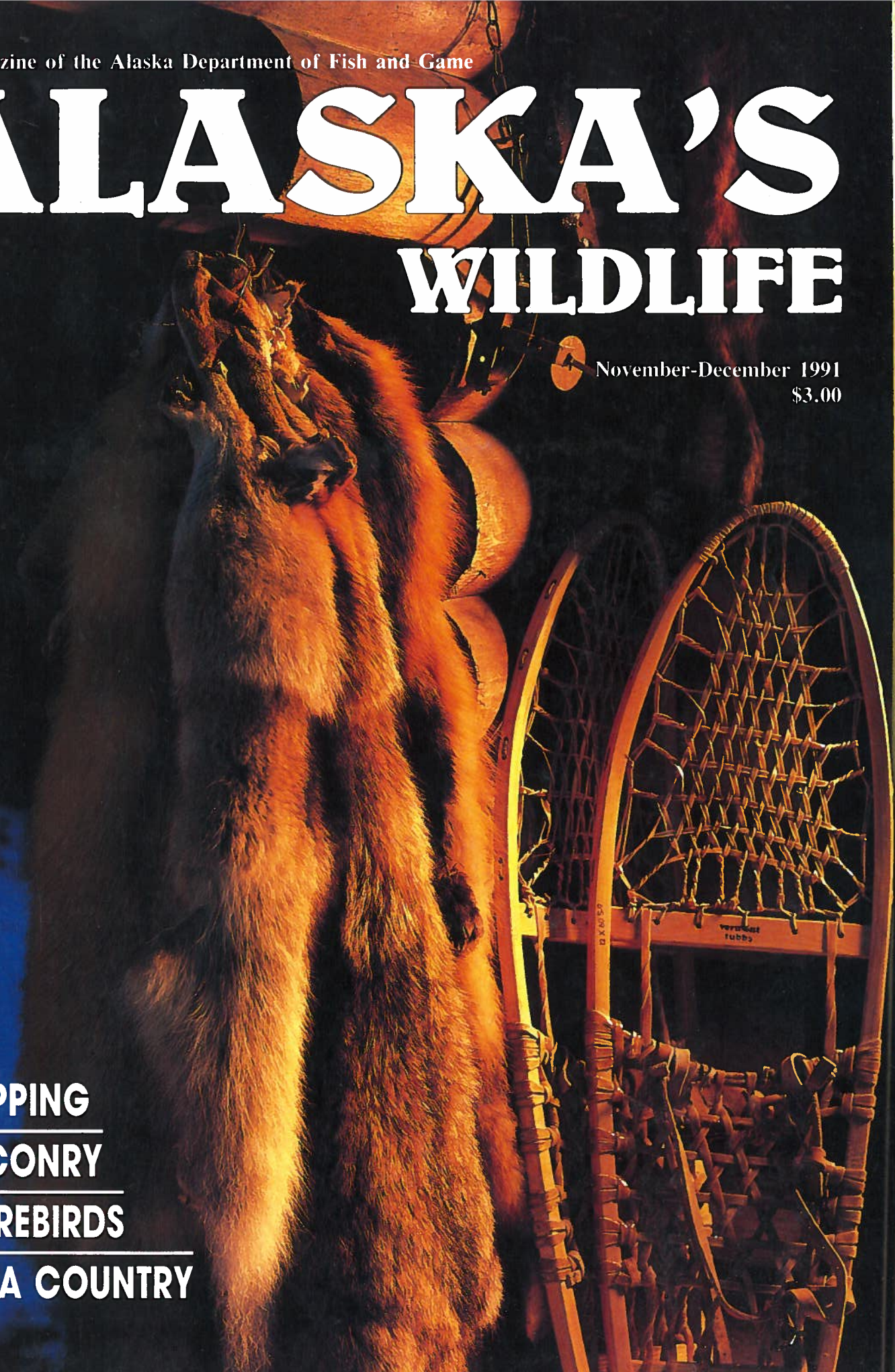
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TRAPPING

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European Ban Threatens Alaska Trapping

by Herbert R. Melchior

Changing public attitudes around the world are forcing political actions that could have a significant effect on trapping in Alaska. Two recent political decisions will affect the way Alaska's fur resources are trapped and marketed by the state's several thousand trappers.

The Council of Ministers of the European Community (EC) is likely to adopt during October a regulation that will ban the importation of pelts and manufactured fur goods of 13 species of wild furbearers into the 12 EC nations from wild fur producing countries that permit the use of the steel leghold traps or which do not adhere to internationally accepted standards of humane trapping. The ban, if passed, will take effect January 1, 1995. However, this effective date may be extended one year if a review by the EC Commission determines before July 1, 1994, that a country has made sufficient progress toward developing humane methods of trapping in their territory.

Alaskan trappers harvest 13 species of furbearers that enter the international fur market annually. Some species that occur in Alaska, like arctic fox, mink, red fox, red squirrel, and wolverine, are not on the list of furs to be banned, but 8 species are included: beaver, coyote, lynx, marten, muskrat, river otter, weasel (ermine), and wolf. Three of these species—beaver, lynx, and marten—are especially important to Alaskan trappers since the export and sale of their pelts brings several million dollars into the state each year.

Fur auction (below) and Fairbanks retail outlet (right) showing lynx and fox pelts indicate the economic importance of trapping in Alaska.



John W. Warden

Efforts to kill the proposed EC regulation before the EC Council of Environment Ministers were to vote on it were made by Canada and the U.S., but clearly these efforts were mostly unsuccessful. I say "mostly" because some modifications of the proposal were achieved, notably the effective date of the ban. In one form of the proposal, the ban would have started in 1993 instead of 1995 or 1996.

In May of this year the Alaska Legislature passed a resolution (HCS CSSJR 16(L&C)), which Governor Hickel signed on June 3, 1991, advising the Office of the United States Trade Representative that "the enactment of the EC proposed ban



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would have a significant negative effect on the fur trapping industry in Alaska" and strongly urging the Office "to accord the highest priority to representing the United States fur trapping industry" (see sidebar).

Also in May of this year, representatives from Canada and the United States presented a seminar at the United States Mission in Brussels to staff of the EC Environment Ministers to provide them information that might lead to modification of the ban. Although this information may have led to a delay in the vote that was scheduled for June, it was not enough to overcome the political pressures within European countries to adopt the regulation.

Unfortunately, political decisions are not always based on fact and reason or are consistent with the stated objectives. For example, the stated objective of the new regulation is to force countries that allow the use of leghold traps to ban that use in favor of what the Europeans view as more humane methods of capture. Therefore, it is curious that three of the most widely used furs in the world, arctic fox, red fox, and mink, are not included in the list of furs to be banned.

These three species are raised on fur ranches as well as caught in the wild. They comprise the majority of the furs traded worldwide. Most of the pelts come from ranches rather than being trapped in the wild. Is it mere coincidence that these species, a large proportion of which are raised on ranches in European and adjacent countries, were excluded from the list of furs to be banned even though most wild caught foxes and mink are taken in leghold traps?

What effect will the ban have on trappers in North America, and Alaska in particular? In 1992, all trade barriers among the 12 EC nations will cease. Economists project that the EC will be one of the largest trading groups in the world. Since furs are an internationally traded commodity, the effect of a ban on importation into EC countries could be significant.

Several thousand Alaskan trappers use leghold traps and derive important winter income from trapping. This income is especially important because it is available during a season when jobs are scarce, especially in rural Alaska. Therefore, the effect of lost market opportunity for these trappers could be serious.

The sale of raw pelts brings several million dollars into Alaska each year. Additional value is added when furs are made into handicrafts or items of clothing before being marketed. Although Alaskans do not market many finished goods in Europe, a significant amount of raw fur is traded to European countries.

The second major political decision affecting trapping, to establish international standards of humane trapping, has its origins back in 1983 in a move to ban the use of leghold traps worldwide through trade restrictions. That year a resolution was introduced at the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna) meeting by Gambia to

prohibit trade in products from animals "taken by cruel methods including the steel jawed leghold trap."

The resolution was rejected as inappropriate for CITES, but the animal welfare intent behind it was discussed. Countries that are members of CITES (over 100 countries) agreed that definitions of "cruel" and "inhumane" in the context of taking animals (or products made from them) to be entered into international trade were not clearly understood in the same way by all countries. Canada suggested that the matter of trapping be considered by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) with a view to establishing international humane trapping standards.

For ISO to establish a Technical Committee to undertake the process of drafting any standard, at least five countries must agree to full participation status. Since seven countries agreed, ISO established Technical Committee 191 (TC191) on Humane Animal (Mammal) traps. The committee first met in March 1987. Canada is providing the Secretariat (administrative support) for TC191 and was nominated by the group to chair the committee.

Many countries have their own national standards setting process and they in turn relate to ISO for the purpose of establishing international standards. This is to insure equality of weights, measures, quality, etc., of goods and services traded internationally. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) is the United State's national standards setting organization.

Three Working Groups (WGs) were established by TC191 to begin drafting aspects of international trapping standards in relation to definitions (WG1), killing type traps (WG2) and restraining type trap (WG3). Canadians dominate the membership of WG's 1 and 2 while the U.S. Technical Advisory Group (USTAG) established by ANSI is doing the work of WG3. Killing devices include traps like the conibear type; restraining devices include such things as box traps, leghold traps, and snares.

Drafting standards for trapping devices presents some real challenges to the working groups, especially groups 2 and 3. Standards must be based on scientifically achievable and repeatable measurements. In addition, trapping devices must be reasonably efficient at capturing animals and practical to use or trappers won't use them. Finally, the capture devices must be able to kill or restrain animals in a humane manner where "humane" means a method acceptable to the general international public as reflected by the standards.

Alaska is involved in the standards setting process as a member of USTAG, one of four states with membership in this group. Alaska's cultural diversity and variety of habitats and trapping conditions are not matched by conditions in other states so it seemed important to be represented in this effort which will

affect trapping in Alaska and throughout the world. If we aren't represented, someone else will make all the decisions pertaining to the establishment of trapping standards that are likely to affect the marketing of Alaskan furs.

It will be through the market place that the standards will be implemented since adoption of the standards by a nation is voluntary. We do not have to abide by any standards agreed to by ISO, but countries that buy our products can ban those products from importation, just as the EC has proposed to do, if they decide we should abide by the standards in order to have access to their market.

Finally, the World Conservation Union (formerly the International Union for the Conservation of Nature) passed a resolution at its meeting last November endorsing the scientifically based ISO trap standards setting process. Clearly, the opinion of a significant proportion of world leaders in conservation supports improvements in the way wild animals are captured. By participating, Alaska has the opportunity to influence the direction of this process so that the final standards are not detrimental to Alaska's trappers whose furs enter the international marketplace.

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Alaska State Legislature Supports Trapping Industry

The following Legislative Resolve, No. 44, relating to the international trade in furs, was passed by the 1991 session of the Alaska State Legislature.

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF ALASKA:

WHEREAS a substantial number of the products of the United States fur trapping industry have historically been exported to the member states of the European Community; and

WHEREAS the European Commission, the executive body of the European Community, has proposed to ban the importation of furs originating in countries that have not prohibited the use of leg-hold traps; and

WHEREAS the European Parliament, the advisory body of the European Community, has overwhelmingly supported this proposal; and

WHEREAS 7 of the 12 countries that comprise the European Community do not prohibit the use of leg-hold traps; and

WHEREAS several countries with which Alaska competes in the international fur market provide indirect subsidies to their producers of farm-raised fur, thereby creating an unfair price advantage for the subsidized producers and hampering the effective operation of free trade; and

WHEREAS the United States does not prohibit the use of leg-hold traps; and

WHEREAS trapping is an important tool in the management of wildlife; and

WHEREAS trapping is a traditional harvest method of Alaska Native cultural groups and many other Alaskans, providing food and clothing for personal use as well as for trade or barter for other goods; and

WHEREAS trapping is an established and important economic activity for many residents of Alaska; and

WHEREAS the enactment of the European Community's proposed ban would have a significant negative effect on the fur trapping industry in Alaska;

BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Alaska State Legislature strongly urges the Office of the United States Trade Representative to accord the highest priority to representing the United States fur trapping industry by promoting fair and free trade in the industry at all the international trade forums, including both bilateral and multilateral negotiations.

COPIES of this resolution shall be sent to the Honorable Robert A. Mosbacher, Sr., Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce; the Honorable Carla A. Hills, U.S. Trade Representative; and to the Honorable Ted Stevens and the Honorable Frank Murkowski, U.S. Senators, and the Honorable Don Young, U.S. Representative, members of the Alaska delegation in Congress.