

Bransford's trapping picture told the tale

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Wolf trapper Josh Bransford followed all the rules.

He obtained an Idaho trapping license. He purchased a wolf tag.

As required, he placed his traps away from prohibited areas - such as campgrounds - to minimize conflicts.

He used the appropriate traps.

Bransford heeded a requirement that he check his traps at least every 72 hours.

He attended Idaho Fish and Game's prerequisite wolf trapping class - which spells out how a trapper is obligated to dispatch his prey and what he should do if a non-targeted animal, such as a domestic dog, is caught.

Bransford, an employee of Nez Perce National Forest, next trapped a wolf on March 18 along the Red River where wolf trapping is sanctioned.

Then he did one more thing.

It's unclear how long he waited to put the animal out of its misery. Before he did so, Bransford stopped long enough to be photographed with his prey caught in the trap, still alive and leaving a circle of blood-soaked snow.

He was grinning.

The snapshot went viral.

Bransford crossed all kinds of fault lines.

He angered anew environmental groups opposed to Idaho's congressionally authorized authority to kill wolves.

He sickened those Idahoans who don't mind hunting a wolf, but get queasy about watching any animal suffer in a trap. A decade ago, when Fish and Game last asked Idahoans, 90 percent approved of hunting; only 3.2 percent opposed. But trapping found approval among only 57.3 percent, and 19.6 percent opposed.

And he embarrassed trappers.

So what's the solution?

Ban wolf trapping? Rely exclusively on hunting? Everyone's conscience is clear.

Doing so, however, probably guarantees expanding wolf populations in Panhandle, Lolo, Dworkshak-Elk City, Selway and Middle Fork areas, where hunting alone has proven inadequate in countering the wolf's talent at reproducing and taking refuge in inaccessible terrain. In the just-closed season, Fish and Game sold 43,300 wolf tags. Just 375 wolves were taken; of those, 123 were trapped in about one-fifth of Idaho's land mass where trapping was permitted.

End trapping and you will create more conflicts between wolves and people in communities such as Elk City. You will lose more domestic animals.

Elk populations in places like the Lolo zone will continue to decline.

Or you could prohibit ordinary citizens from trapping wolves. Professionals at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services undoubtedly would be more discreet. At least they wouldn't get caught taking pictures and showcasing the photos on the Internet.

Wolves would continue to die in traps, while ordinary citizens who played by Fish and Game's rules become resentful at how they've been shunted aside.

Why not permit trapping, just with tougher requirements?

Where do you begin?

It's one thing to define a law. Laws are concrete. Etiquette and ethics are vague. You know it when you see it.

Try telling someone how long he's got to dispatch a wolf once he's encountered one in his traps. If he acts within five minutes, is he within the rules? If he waits one minute longer, should he be fined?

How do you tell someone that snapping a picture of a trapped and bleeding wolf is a crime when trapping and killing the wolf is not?

Anywhere else, such a law would invite arbitrary enforcement, inconsistent punishment and, inevitably, a judicial rebuke declaring it unconstitutional.

Idahoans made a bargain here. We want to control wolf populations, but it means resorting to trapping, a practice many find distasteful, if not inhumane. In the abstract, we're willing to tolerate the trade-off - until, of course, somebody like Bransford forces us to watch. - M.T.