Trapping Education

Story and Photos By
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When I was approached to write this article about trapping education programs, I spent some time wondering what tack I would take (full disclosure: I grew up in northwestern McLean County and have been involved in trapping my entire life through interaction with my father and grandfather). After a little reflection, I decided to pursue the angle that trapping education represents the preservation of one of the "lost arts" of our increasingly urban culture.

Let's face it; participation in trapping, hunting and almost all outdoor recreation and management activities has declined in recent decades as our population becomes more urbanized. Sure, youth these days are pretty adept at shooting big bucks, but far too often they are honing their marksmanship on a "trophy hunter" video game rather than truly taking to the field.

The more I thought about the varied educational efforts regarding trapping taking place around our state, I came to the realization that I couldn't, in all honesty, refer to trapping education as lost art. Rather, I came to see that I had to represent these educational pursuits as what they truly are; constantly evolving methods that reinvigorate and pass on a way of life that both connects us to our past as well as provides a relationship to the natural world for our future. Once I came to that decision, I figured the best way to illustrate trapping education and the methods it teaches is to highlight some of the individuals and organizations who take on this charge in our state.

(Photo courtesy Dan Schweisthal.)

Dan Schweisthal, head trapping instructor for Fur Takers of America Chapter 17-I, displays a furbearer pelt at a trapper education course.

Dan Schweisthal is the head trapping instructor for Fur Takers of America Chapter 17-I and a certified Trapper Safety Instructor with the Department of Natural Resources. When asked what his motivation was for becoming a trapper instructor, the Kane County resident related that he had noticed a lack of instructors in his area and believed

that someone should step forward and take on the task.

Six-plus years later, Schweisthal is still at it, and as enthusiastic as ever about teaching students. His chapter conducts one class annually and enlists attendees throughout the year by advertising at sports shows and other events. Schweisthal explained that classes contain anywhere from 10 to 40 students, with an average class containing about 20 individuals.

Most students are youths learning to trap, but another large component is parents and other adults going through the class with their children or entering the sport themselves. Schweisthal confided that he finds the one-on-one interaction available in trapper education classes invaluable. Further, he thinks it is reassuring to new trappers to know that an instructor lives in their area and is available to help them with questions that may arise on the trap line.

As we conversed, I wondered what Schweisthal enjoys most about trapping instruction. He related: "The most rewarding aspect of teaching these classes is when a former student calls or visits with stories or pictures of their time on the trap line and tells us how our instruction helped them get started. When that happens, you really know you are having a positive effect on another person."

(Photo courtesy Danny Brown, Missouri Department of Conservation.)

Students gather around an instructor demonstrating techniques for setting body-grip traps.

However, trapping instruction in Illinois is not limited to state-sponsored classes for youth. A class taught to DNR Conservation Police Officers by Ron Boeser, for example, illustrates that trapping instruction reaches a wide audience.

Boeser, a Mattoon-area trapper, also is a certified DNR Trapper Safety Education Instructor and for 15 years has held annual youth-certification classes. When approached by a local Consrevation Police sergeant to teach a class about trapping techniques to his field officers, Boeser was more than happy to answer the call.

The class took the form of a one-day seminar aimed at enhancing the trapping instruction that CPOs received in their training academy, providing the 14 attending officers tips on how to recognize where traps are most likely to be located in the field, as well as furthering the ability of officers to quickly recognize legal traps and trap placements. The instruction ultimately aided officers in monitoring the legal compliance and safety of trappers in their areas.

Boeser, like Schweisthal, was motivated to enter the trapping education field when he perceived a lack of trappers and instructors in his locality. He was "recruited," in his words, by the local hunter and boater safety instructors. Boeser takes his duties to pass along his knowledge seriously.

"If we don't have new trappers entering the ranks," he said, "our sport doesn't have a future." Boeser echoed Schweisthal in feeling that some of the most rewarding experiences involve times when students return voluntarily for further instruction, especially concerning how to handle fur they have caught.

Organizations get in on the trapping education game, too. The Illinois Trappers Association, a statewide trapping organization, conducts education efforts for various audiences. Over the last 4 years, ITA has conducted a three-day Young Trappers Camp at Carlyle Lake in Clinton County, with 15-30 students (and parents) in attendance each year. The camps consist of the state-mandated, eight-hour Trapper Safety Education Course,

Part of every trapper education course is a session introducing students to the tools of the trade.

(Photo courtesy Ralph J. Cates III.)

Workshop participants learn a variety of trapping techniques. Here an instructor displays the proper way to bed a trap in a dirt-hole set.

as well as as many hands-on field activities as possible.

Paul Kelley, ITA President and one of the camp instructors, believes the hands-on instruction is the strength of this course.

"The biggest advantage of the three-day camp structure is to give participants plenty of opportunity for hands-on learning," Kelley explained. "Getting into the field and putting classroom instruction into practice provides invaluable experience for our campers."

In addition to more youth-oriented efforts, such as the Young Trappers Camps, the ITA also has conducted three workshops specifically designed to help familiarize natural resource professionals in modern trapping practices and furbearer management. The workshops, held at Jim Edgar Panther Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area in Cass County, have been well attended by wildlife biologists, Conservation Police Officers, state park site superintendents and others. Workshops are structured to address issues with the Illinois Wildlife Code as it relates to trapping programs on state properties, as well as providing ample opportunities for hands-on field instruction. One goal of the workshops is to help resource professionals better understand how trapping programs can co-exist with, and benefit, other programs.

To that end, Paul Kelley believes that: "The workshops have proven to be an unqualified success, since trapping programs were instituted on several state sites, and trapping regulations liberalized at several others as a result of the dialogue occurring at these events."

The trapping education efforts highlighted here are a few of those taking place every year in our state. Many dedicated individuals joyfully take it upon themselves to give of their time and expertise to pass on the heritage of trapping to future generations.

Hands-on skill practice takes students and the instructor to the water to learn how to retrieve a beaver set.

In Illinois, those under 18 years of age must pass a trapper education course before they are allowed to buy a trapping license. Information on courses, including a calendar of upcoming classes, is available at www.dnr.state.il.us/safety/trap.htm.

You can meet half of the trapper education requirement by completing the online course available at www.trappered.com. After successful completion of the online portion, you will be able to print a certificate that allows you to attend a field instruction portion of the regular trapper education course with a certified instructor in order to receive your trapper education certification.

The vast majority of these folks never receive monetary compensation for their efforts, though when one talks to them, it is clear to see they firmly believe their rewards are of much greater value than money. The satisfaction of knowing that one has passed on the knowledge of generations spanning back to the fur traders who opened our country is, in the parlance of today's advertising, "priceless."

When viewed in the context that, to many current trappers, teaching the craft to those coming after them is one of their life's highest callings, it is easy to conclude that this "lost art" is not so lost, after all.

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