

## FAQ'S ABOUT CHANGES TO OTTER TRAPPING IN VERMONT

Q: HOW IS THE VERMONT DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE PROPOSING TO CHANGE THE OTTER TRAPPING SEASON?

A: It wants to increase the river otter-trapping season from 4 to 5 months to the end of March.

Q: WHY IS IT CHANGING THE SEASON?

A: A trapper petitioned the Department to extend the otter-trapping season to coincide with the beaver-trapping season. The rationale for this request was that “trappers have had to contend with the possibility of taking an otter out-of-season during the month of March.” (5) In December the Fish and Wildlife Board voted 13-1 to preliminarily approve the season extension, pending a public comment period.

Currently there are rules in place to protect otter from being caught in otherwise legally-set beaver traps during the month of March after the otter season has closed. These rules, which require “specific placement, length and configuration of triggers on body gripping traps, were developed and tested in other jurisdictions where results indicated a **high efficiency for meeting this desired objective,**” and, after 10 years in place, “**Vermont’s experience yielded the same success. . .**” (5)

However, Vermont trappers complained to the Department that these rules “sometimes result in **inefficient** capture of beaver and otter” and they have an “**ardent** interest in restoring proper trap function by eliminating the trap restrictions now in place during the month of March.” (5)

Thus, **the primary purpose of changing these rules (which were highly effective at protecting otters) is that trappers, who represent 0.15% of the population, feel inconvenienced.** Clearly, something is seriously wrong when the Department of Fish and Wildlife is swayed by such a self-serving argument. A more sensible approach would be for the Department to **shorten the beaver season** to make it concurrent with the otter season as it was back in 2007.

Q: WILL THIS SEASON CHANGE AFFECT FEMALE OTTERS THAT GIVE BIRTH IN THE SPRING?

A: Yes. Otter pups are born “between late March to May” according to the Department’s own fact sheet. (1) Extending the otter season through March means that newly-born pups could be orphaned.

Q: DO OTTERS HAVE ANY SPECIAL STATUS IN VERMONT?

A: Yes. **Otters are a “Species of Greatest Conservation Need.”** Vermont’s Wildlife Action Plan designates Species of Greatest Conservation Need based upon “species rarity, species designated as at-risk, species whose habitat is vulnerable to loss, fragmentation, conversion or succession and those threatened by exotic plants or animals.” (3) Otters are on this list. It doesn’t make sense to extend the trapping season on animals that face these threats.

Q: WHAT IS THE POPULATION OF OTTERS IN VERMONT?

A: **The Department lacks reliable data on the distribution and abundance of otter in the state,** as stated in its Wildlife Action Plan. (3) Further, the Department’s September 2016 Assessment of the Status and Harvest Trends for Otter states that, “The increase in harvest rate per trapper **likely** reflects an **increasing otter population but may also be influenced by an increase in the overall efficiency of Vermont trappers** and/or an increase in effort per trapper.” (6) Lacking reliable population data, an extension of the season is irresponsible.

Q: WHAT KIND OF THREATS DO OTTERS FACE IN VERMONT?

A: **Otters are known to be contaminated with mercury, which “can negatively affect reproduction and survival.”** (3) In 2001 the Department found otters to be contaminated with mercury above levels considered safe by the EPA and has failed to evaluate the potential impact on the current population. The Wildlife Action Plan states there is a lack of research and monitoring of the impacts of heavy metals and contaminants on otter populations. (3)

Otters also face threats from loss or degradation of habitat.

Q: HOW MANY OTTERS ARE KILLED BY TRAPPING?

A: The Department estimates that there are 800 trappers in Vermont (4) accounting for 1/10th of 1% of the State's population. In 2013-14, they reported trapping and killing 246 otters. This figure does not account for the number of otters who are killed outside of the regulated season under the wildlife causing damage statute. Vermont leads the nation in wildlife viewing (2); over 80% of Vermonters participated in wildlife viewing in 2015(7), yet the interests of trappers seem to take precedence.

Q: HOW DOES THE FISH AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT ASSURE THAT ALL STAKEHOLDERS HAVE AN EQUAL CHANCE TO ENJOY WILDLIFE?

**A: Unfortunately, the Department is failing to manage wildlife “as Public Trust Resources” and “consistent with the North American Model of fish and wildlife conservation” in accordance with its own Strategic Plan.** Strategies in the North American Model include: “More effective public involvement and stakeholder participation methods; Broadening our conservation agenda to reflect a diversity of values, users and their desires; More direct approaches for dealing with moral and ethical issues” (2)

Currently the Fish and Wildlife Board, which has the authority to approve trapping rules and regulations, has **no one representing views that differ from the hunting, trapping and angling constituencies.** The Board has been particularly unresponsive to the hundreds of e-mails and public comments opposing the extension of the otter-trapping season. There are trappers and a taxidermist on this Board who stand to financially benefit from expanded trapping seasons. We view this as a potential conflict of interest.

In fact, the Spring 2015 issue of the Department's “Furbearer Management Newsletter” states, “...there are many challenges facing furbearers and their management in Vermont, including . . .**the increased scrutiny and influence of**

**people who do not fully understand or appreciate the importance and value of furbearer management . . .”** There is no mistaking the Department’s us-against-them attitude.

As stated by the Vermont Center for Biological Diversity in their comments to the Department, “Allowing wildlife species to become more abundant, more visible, and therefore more reliably ‘watchable’ will benefit far more people than trapping does, both in terms of quality of life as well as economic benefits to the state. ... [T]he Department and FWB do a great injustice to the residents of the state as well as future generations, when they manage most wildlife in terms of sustainable ‘harvest’ levels, rather than for abundant populations that contribute to dynamic, vigorous, resilient ecosystems, and which may be enjoyed by all residents of the state.”

(1)

<http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=227933>

(2)

[http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_73079/File/About%20Us/Budget%20and%20Planning/Strategic\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_73079/File/About%20Us/Budget%20and%20Planning/Strategic_Plan.pdf)

(3)

[http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/about\\_us/budget\\_and\\_planning/revising\\_vermont\\_s\\_wildlife\\_action\\_plan/wildlife\\_action\\_plan\\_faqs/](http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/about_us/budget_and_planning/revising_vermont_s_wildlife_action_plan/wildlife_action_plan_faqs/)

(4) Vermont Furbearer Management Newsletter Spring 2015

<http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=227950>

(5)

[http://vtfishandwildlife.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_73079/File/Vermont%20Fish%20and%20Wildlife%20Board%20Meeting%20Documents/2016-Recommendations-to-Furbearer-Petition.pdf](http://vtfishandwildlife.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_73079/File/Vermont%20Fish%20and%20Wildlife%20Board%20Meeting%20Documents/2016-Recommendations-to-Furbearer-Petition.pdf)

(6)

[http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_73079/File/Vermont%20Fish%20and%20Wildlife%20Board%20Meeting%20Documents/2016-Bobcat-and-Otter-Assessment-Final-Report.pdf](http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_73079/File/Vermont%20Fish%20and%20Wildlife%20Board%20Meeting%20Documents/2016-Bobcat-and-Otter-Assessment-Final-Report.pdf)

(7)

<http://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Documents/2016/WorkGroups/House%20Fish%20and%20Wildlife/Bills/H.552/H.552~Catherine%20Gjessing~Responsive%20Management%20Wildlife%20Opinion%20Survey~1-22-2016.pdf>