

Bobcat fur coats raise trapping concerns in West

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RENO, Nevada - Bobcat fur coats have become a hot item among the fashion-conscious in Russia and China, leading to a big jump in prices and exports for the soft, spotted pelts. The bobcat, whose fur is coveted by the fashion-conscious in Russian and China, is the focus of a battle between trappers and wildlife advocates. The fur's booming popularity has some wildlife advocates worried about possible over-trapping of the cats, which are so elusive that most states do not know just how many exist.

Bobcat pelts now draw some of the highest prices among trapped furs, recently commanding as much as \$550 for a single hide. As the price has gone up, the number of bobcat skins exported by the U.S. has nearly tripled in five years, to 49,700 in 2006. Because most state wildlife officials do not know the actual size of their bobcat populations, there's no way to determine if they are being overtrapped, according to wildlife advocates.

"These bobcat harvest numbers should be a red flag to tell biologists that economics and fashion trends may be negatively impacting a species," said Dave Pauli, western regional director of the Washington, D.C.-based Humane Society.

Overseas demand has driven up both the price and the exports, said Brian MacMillan, vice president of U.S. operations for the continent's largest fur auction house, North American Fur Auctions. Bobcat skins fetched more than any other wild fur-bearing animal at his Toronto-based company's two latest auctions, averaging more than \$200.

"It's one of the hottest furs today. It's definitely a high-fashion piece," MacMillan said. "The primary market is with Russia, but they're also going to China, Hong Kong and Italy."

Despite the demand, most trappers struggle to earn \$2,000 a season from bobcats, said Joel Blakeslee, president of the Nevada Trappers Association. In fact, the number of bobcat pelts exported by the U.S. fell to 31,680 in 2007, the latest year for which statistics are available. Federal officials say they are not concerned about the population of bobcats, which are twice the size of house cats and prowl in every state but Alaska, Delaware and Hawaii. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates there are at least 1.4 million to 2.6 million bobcats nationwide.

But it's trapping in the Western states that concerns some wildlife advocates. Pelts from Western bobcats are most prized because the region's high elevations and cold temperatures make their spotted tan fur softer and longer. The Humane Society of the United States and other groups are urging Western states to scale back trapping, particularly in Nevada, New Mexico and Wyoming, which have the region's highest number of bobcats killed and no trapping quotas. Lack of research has made it unclear whether or not bobcat numbers are declining or whether trapping is hurting the species, one expert said.

"The bobcat gets low priority," said Kevin Hansen, author of *Bobcat: Master of Survival* and a ranger for New Mexico state parks. "It's real good at being hidden, and it makes them hard to count. Wildlife officials never have all the data they want, so they base decisions on inadequate data."

Don Molde of Reno, a former board member of the Defenders of Wildlife, thinks trappers in Nevada should be subject to quotas like hunters. "There's no question that bobcats are taking a hammering across the West because of high pelt prices," Molde said. "I don't think the unlimited killing of bobcats is doing the public's interest."

Nevada is considering a shorter bobcat trapping season this year, but because fewer kittens were born in the last two years, spokesman Chris Healy said. Wildlife officials say the kitten numbers are down because of drought and lack of prey, not because of overtrapping.

"I would say we have a very stable and healthy population of bobcats out there," said Kevin Lansford, furbearer-predator specialist for the Nevada wildlife department and a former federal trapper. "Their population is driven by environmental conditions far more than harvest numbers."

New Mexico also rejected a recent request to restrict trapping. Some states have stricter regulations for trapping bobcats: Montana, Oregon and Utah have trapping quotas. Idaho has no limits but a shorter season. Arizona, California, Colorado and Washington ban foothold traps that snap shut to snare the animal by the leg. The varied regulations have led to poaching, including in Montana, according to Jeff Scott, an investigator for the state's wildlife agency, who said higher pelt prices allowed trappers to earn as much as \$25,000 to \$30,000 a season. Some trappers are capturing bobcats in states with quotas and bringing them to Wyoming, which has no limits, said Scott Adell, a Wyoming Game and Fish Department investigator. Under a 1973 international treaty, all bobcat pelts must be tagged by state officials before they can be exported.

"I think we're damaging the resource" without trapping quotas, Adell said.