

SCOTTISH SPCA

Scotland's Animal Welfare Charity

Snaring in Scotland: A Scottish SPCA Survey of Suffering

The Scottish SPCA has long called for a ban on the use of all snares in Scotland on animal welfare grounds. In the Society's view even target species deserve a more humane method of control. It is our opinion that snares are cruel; snares are indiscriminate; snares are unnecessary; and legal snaring is almost impossible to enforce.

In 2004, the Scottish Parliament brought in amendments to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 which placed some restrictions on snares, but did not ban their use. These amendments included the requirement to check snares at least once every 24 hours with the immediate removal of all animals from the snare, whether alive or dead and further restrictions on the use and sale of all self-locking snares.

While the Society believed that the amendments to the Wildlife and Countryside Act would go some way to aid enforcement, we did not believe that these would have any real effect on the suffering caused by these devices, nor on their indiscriminate nature. The Society considers that the prevalence of illegal use over many years and the continued suffering and indiscriminate capture caused by legally set snares must discredit the argument for retaining any type of snares – they are simply too easy to misuse and are inhumane.

The 2007 Survey

In July 2007, the Scottish SPCA conducted a survey of Scottish veterinary surgeries, Scottish Wildlife Crime Officers (WCOs), wildlife rescue and protection agencies and Scottish SPCA Inspectors. The Scottish SPCA chose to survey these groups as these are all professionally involved in the treatment of animals or in wildlife crime enforcement.

The main purpose of this survey was to determine the effectiveness of the 2004 amendments in eliminating the suffering caused by snares. The survey questioned the numbers and types of animals found caught in snares in Scotland, the locus of the incident and whether the respondent felt that the animal had been caused suffering. The respondents were also invited to give their opinion as to whether they would like to see a ban on these devices and to offer any further comments on the issue.

Sample

The questionnaire was sent to vet practices across Scotland, the entire Scottish SPCA Inspectorate (64 Uniformed Members of Staff), to the 8 Wildlife Crime Co-ordinators for circulation amongst their WCOs and to 3 wildlife rescue and protection agencies in Scotland.

Response

The Scottish SPCA received responses from 102 vet practices, 64 Inspectors, 18 WCOs and 3 wildlife rescue and protection agencies. Of those who responded, 10 vets, 34 Inspectors, 12 WCOs, and all 3 wildlife rescue agencies had encountered animals caught in snares since the 2004 amendments. Incidents were reported the length and breadth of Scotland, from Sutherland to Lockerbie and from Inveraray to St Andrews. While a few responses indicated that the snares had been illegally set, the vast majority viewed the snares as legally set under the current legislation.

The Results of the Survey

The Scottish SPCA asked all respondents whether they had dealt with an animal that had been snared since the 2004 amendments, and if so to give details of the type of animal and whether it suffered fatal injuries from being snared (shown in Table 1 below). 59 (32%) of those who responded said that they had encountered an animal that had been snared.

Table 1

Type of Animal	Fatal	Non Fatal	TOTAL
Cat	4	27	31
Dog	5	9	14
Fox	28	19	47
Rabbit	11	5	16
Deer	19	7	26
Badger	58	41	99

Hare	22	6	28
Pine Marten	2	-	2
Otter	-	1	1
Hedgehog	1	1	2
Owl	1	-	1
Squirrel	1	-	1
Livestock	1	-	1
			269

Types of Animals Snared

The results show a wide variety of animals reported caught in a snare, with a total number of 269 animals reported. Despite the fact that snares are used to catch target species of foxes and rabbits, the survey found that the vast majority reported (77%) were non-target species, including companion animals (17%) and European Protected Species (12%). This evidence clearly shows the indiscriminate nature of snares.

The Scottish SPCA believes strongly that, as a snare is a crude and simple device, it is unable to distinguish between protected and non-protected species or domestic and wild animals. This view is backed up further by evidence from the Independent Working Group on Snares, which suggests that even with good fieldcraft and training, the overall proportion of non-target species captured in fox snares may be around 40 percent (Report of the independent Working Group on Snares, 2005).

The Scottish SPCA also has serious concerns over the actual legality of the unintentional and reckless snaring of European Protected Species (EPS). Under Section 39(1) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c) Regulations 1994 (amended 2007), it is an offence to *"deliberately or recklessly to capture, injure or kill a wild animal of a European protected species"*. This calls into serious question the future of snaring, as snares can, and do, capture, injure and kill EPS. Scotland's diverse landscape and vast amount of wildlife therefore make it highly unlikely that anywhere in Scotland could be guaranteed free of EPS.

Following recent European Court of Justice (ECJ) judgements with regard to the United Kingdom's incomplete transposition of Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the Habitats Directive there is a requirement to amend wildlife and habitats legislation in Scotland. This would include a general prohibition on the use of all indiscriminate means of capture and killing. This may have to include snares.

Suffering Caused By Snaring

The survey asked respondents for their professional opinion as to whether animals they had seen snared had suffered or not. 90% responded that they believed that the animals had suffered. Some respondents gave descriptions of the conditions that the animals were found in:

'The rabbit managed to snap the snare from its anchor and slowly choked to death in front of a member of the public. The member of the public did not see the wire and thought it was injured. It took ten minutes to die.'

Scottish SPCA Inspector, Tayside

'I have seen animals almost severed around their thorax, with the snare cutting through the skin muscle and sometimes, even bone, as a result of the animal struggling to escape.'

Vet, Midlothian

'A badger was traced hanging over a wall by a snare which had been pulled out of the ground from its securing pole. It had walked some distance and hung itself over a drystone dyke when the pole caught in the wall. This had clearly been a prolonged and distressing death.'

WCO, Dumfriesshire

'The throat of the deer was lacerated and it appeared to have struggled for some time before finally collapsing and strangulating shortly before my arrival to the scene.'

Scottish SPCA Inspector, West Lothian

'The fox had been lucky to break the rabbit snare which had cut deeply into its flesh and then healed over embedding the snare in the wound; unfortunately this left an infected mess and the fox had to be euthanased.'

Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre, Ayrshire

The survey also found that out of the 269 animals found caught in a snare, 154 (57%) suffered injuries that proved to be fatal. The Scottish SPCA believes that this evidence is highly significant as it shows that snares are rarely simply "holding devices", which restrain the animal until it can be humanely dispatched. Such a high mortality rate, combined with the above eye-witness expert evidence of suffering strongly reinforces the Scottish SPCA's long held belief that snares are inhumane and cause pain and distress to any animal which they catch.

In the last year alone, the Scottish SPCA witnessed over 50 animals that died in snares, suspected causes of death ranged from strangulation, septicaemia and drowning. Others had sustained injuries such as severe laceration of the area caught by the snare, in some cases so severe that humane destruction was required. Cats and dogs in particular sustained damage to their legs or paws sometimes resulting in amputation.

Should the Government ban snares?

The survey invited respondents to state whether they would like to see a ban on snares in Scotland. A massive 85% of all vets that responded supported a total ban on snares. Some also took the opportunity to comment on their views:

'Snares are cruel no matter what species is trapped'

Vet, Edinburgh

'Snares are outdated and cause immeasurable suffering, pain, anxiety, dehydration, starvation. Far more efficient, less cruel alternatives exist for vermin control.'

Vet, Aberdeenshire

'Snares are barbaric and unselective, catching and torturing a variety of non-target as well as target animals and consigning them to an agonising death by either asphyxiation or cutting off the blood supply to parts of their bodies. For the majority of snared animals, a lingering, agonising death is guaranteed.'

Vet, Falkirk

'Ban as soon as possible.'

Vet, Dumfries and Galloway

'I believe that snares are not an effective way of controlling vermin, they are inhumane and every effort ought to be made to discourage their use.'

Vet, Fife

'Even if snares are used and checked correctly under current legislation I can think of no indication that the immense suffering caused to a snared animal can be justified in any society or country that cares passionately about the future of our countryside, wildlife and animal welfare.'

Vet, West Lothian

The results of the recent Scottish Government consultation on snaring concurred with the evidence received by the survey, with responses indicating 2:1 in favour of a ban.

Summary of Survey Findings

The main findings of this survey are:

- a total number of 269 animals were reported
- 77% were non-target species
- 17% were companion animals and 12% were European

Protected Species

- 57% of the animals suffered injuries that proved to be fatal
- 90% of respondents that had seen snared animals believed in their professional opinion that these animals had suffered
- 85% of vets supported a complete ban on snares

The Scottish SPCA believes that the findings of this survey are highly significant and should not be ignored. All those invited to respond are professionally employed to either enforce animal welfare and wildlife legislation or to provide professional advice on animal welfare, which can be used as evidence in a court of law. The results of this survey clearly show that despite the amendments introduced in 2004 to increase controls on snaring, a large number of animals, both target and non-target species, are being captured and caused suffering by snares.

The Scottish SPCA believes that due to the scale of the practice and the type of landscape where it takes place, the figures reported here only show a small portion of the actual problem. The Scottish SPCA believes that the cruelty associated with snaring makes it an undesirable pest control tool, and at odds with the Scottish Government's and Scottish Parliament's previous commitments to protect animals from pain, suffering and distress.

We also believe that the legality of snaring should be questioned, given the fact that snares catch numerous non-target and protected species.

The Scottish SPCA calls on the Scottish Government to ban this inhumane practice and thereby continue to lead the UK in improving animal welfare.