

# The Somerset badger cull – the theory and the practice

*This article describes events at close quarters, as the author followed some of the night time shooting of badgers during the 2013 pilot cull in Somerset. Watching the cull activity for real allowed a comparison between official guidelines and actual practice on the ground.*

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## Why we were there

The first shots rang out in Somerset on the evening of 26 August 2013, marking the beginning of the Government's controversial badger cull. Many people from all walks of life, including myself had gathered in the cull zone to protest, monitor, and observe. Little did we know how much we would learn and discover about the cull operation and be silent witnesses to the abject failure of the pilot culls.

We were all aware that the Government had insisted that the six-week pilot culls were to test the efficacy (ie. killing "at least 70%" of the badger population) by the untried method of free-shooting and to see if it was a humane method of killing badgers as well as being safe for both the public and non-target animals. However we also knew that the proposed monitoring by government services was woefully inadequate.

My husband and I are wildlife film-makers with years of experience working at night in difficult conditions collecting observations from an apparently random set of events. At times, a friend who is a senior ecological scientist was able to come with us. However, we were shocked at the constraints placed on peaceful monitoring. Rumours circulated that photography could be seen as harassment and a few people were arrested and put under curfew for attempting to record events. Taking notes or going out with maps could be seen as 'going equipped' or 'conspiracy' and subject to the same penalties. Our movements and behaviour were constantly monitored by large numbers of police ostensibly deployed to ensure public safety.

## What we heard and saw

Straight away, we noticed that shooting activity with both moderated and un-moderated weapons implied that the operation was being carried out in a haphazard, non-contiguous way departing significantly from the culling methodology carried out by the Randomised Badger Culling Trial (RBCT). We have subsequently found that monitors from Natural England recorded that some cull operatives had so many sites allocated to them that they were unable to reach them regularly. Such a substantial departure in methodology may well mean that none of the expected benefits achieved by the RBCT can be expected. Perhaps this betrays such a profound



Team Badger, an alliance of groups promoting an alternative to badger culling, has been active in supporting local and national campaigns in 2013-2014.

lack of understanding of the scientific principles underlying the RBCT that it demonstrates the farming industry and cull companies aren't the right people in which to entrust such a sensitive operation as badger culling in any form.

More observations from the cull zone add to this belief. Prior to the start of the culls, we had familiarised ourselves with the Best Practice Guidance produced by Defra. Amongst other things, it states that the use of a white

light spotlight or infra-red rifle scope required the presence of a second person to "scan the wider area for unexpected non-targets, e.g. livestock and members of the public". So why did we increasingly see that cull operatives became deployed as lone shooters only equipped with infra-red rifle scopes? Did this constitute a breach of protocol that could have had serious consequences on safety?

The shooting team also had to undertake risk assessments prior to any culling operation in order to ensure that safe sites were selected and "to avoid shooting if there is any risk of accidental injury to humans e.g. near rights of way, near boundaries with third parties, on the edge of villages and near to rural dwellings...". So why did we frequently hear shots close to footpaths and lanes and, at times, have shots whistle over our heads? The Natural England compliance reports mention that at times an unsuspecting dog walker was only two meters from a shooter hiding in the dark. The ammunition used was high-velocity, so was it purely luck that there wasn't a fatal accident?

After the first 10 days or so, we heard fewer and fewer shots at night. Although moderators were often used, the sound of a moderated shot can travel a fair distance at night when the air is still. Soon, a leak from within the cull companies and widely circulated in the press corroborated our suspicions that the cull operatives were finding it hard to shoot enough badgers to fill the daily quota required to ensure at least 70% of badgers were killed in the zone by free-shooting. On that date, it seemed everyone who possessed a gun in Somerset went out to fire wildly into the night. The evidence was mounting that some of the cull operatives were far from the professional team of marksmen that the Government so often referred to.

## The cull fails

Despite the limited application of free-shooting and the lack of accessibility to the cull operation, a few of our patrol members believe they heard wounded badgers squealing in pain and fear as the first shot failed to kill them; and two dead badgers were found that had collapsed and died after running from shooters. Despite heavy police pressure that included road-blocks to search cars, the carcasses of two shot

badgers were successfully rescued and examined post-mortem by an independent expert forensic pathologist. One had been shot in the spine and suffered significant stress and pain before dying. Scientific tests revealed that both were free from TB.

Subsequently, we have learned that out of nine badgers shot in front of Natural England monitors, three were shot in the wrong area – a wounding rate amounting to 30%. One of these was shot in the shoulder, ran away, was chased by the operator and then shot again 5-10 minutes later. Bearing in mind the very limited monitoring by Natural England, it is reasonable to suggest that these badgers represent the tip of the iceberg.

We can also testify to the socially divisive nature of such a controversial policy that has torn communities apart and set neighbour against neighbour. Police records show that as the tensions rose, aggressive encounters between supporters and opponents of the cull increased.

### Why future badger culling is a dumb idea

Since the end of the cull, data leaked from the Government's own Independent Expert Panel's report indicate that far less than 50% badgers have been killed in both zones by a concerted combination of cage-trapping and free-shooting. In reply, the Government has stated that the low percentage or numbers don't matter; a startling reversal from their repeated statements prior to the cull that at least 70% of badgers must be killed. These latest claims are highly questionable. Peer-reviewed scientific data<sup>1</sup> show if cull rates are as low as 30%, then bTB could rise by 20% in both zones.<sup>2</sup> We are also now aware of the estimated cost of culling. Presently it stands at over £4,000 per badger and when the accurate costs come in, it could be more.

These culls never were justified by the science and are politically motivated. The pilots and extensions have failed to meet the Government's own stated objectives with regard to efficacy and humaneness. They appear to have been unprofessional, uncoordinated and ultimately meaningless, for the cost of badger culling far outweighs the Government's own optimistic but meagre projected benefit. In reality, scientific opinion predicts that the culls will have made the cattle TB situation locally even worse. With the improvements to cattle testing implemented in Wales and Ireland already showing significant benefits, it is time to stop deploying culls to address bTB. If culling continues, the increasing numbers of opponents, including myself, will be out somewhere in the culling zones once again.

### References

1. Effects of culling on badger abundance: implications for tuberculosis control by Woodroffe et al *Journal of Zoology* 274 (2008) 28–37
2. Final Report of the ISG on Cattle TB, June 2007

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