

Ups and downs for the Badger

Two six-week badger cull trials are scheduled to take place from August 2012 and may lead to wider culls countryside. This article considers the unintended consequences which may result from the Government's trial badger control exercise.

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The killing fields...

As the football pundit once famously stated *'it's a funny old world.....'*, and that sentiment surely applies to the world of the badger. On the one hand, through the huge efforts of badger groups nationally, this most iconic of our larger native mammals has made a remarkable come-back from a low point of persecution in the 1970s. Badger digging and baiting had by that time almost entirely eradicated the population over much of the country and especially in deep-mining and other industrial regions. On the other hand, for many in the dairy farming industry, the badger remains public enemy number one. This last situation is most peculiar since all the rigorous scientific evidence is that badgers are not the primary cause of the spread of Bovine TB and the undoubted suffering caused to cattle. Indeed, where control trials have been carried out the evidence is that removal of badgers will cause rapid dispersal of remaining animals, and potentially of disease too, across the landscape. In fact common-sense also would lead to the observation that such interference will have the wrong effect. Furthermore, even if a cull of badgers was in part effective, it would have to carry on from now into the foreseeable future. Are we really prepared to countenance that? In a democracy, are the public willing to sanction such a long-term persecution of one of the British public's favourite mammals?

The UK Randomised Badger Culling Trial (RBCT), or 'Krebs Trial', indicated that culls would make the disease worse by disturbing the badgers' social structure. Culling would make them range out beyond their normal territory and so spread the tuberculosis bacterium to other nearby farms. Furthermore, there are widely held concerns that the effectiveness of the 'free shooting' to be used in the pilots is questionable. There are no studies to inform what will happen where the badgers are simply shot. A one-time government scientist recently suggested that 'free shooting' was "a recipe for perturbation" and the complications implied by that. Defra staff argue that if certain conditions are met, culling might reduce disease incidence by 16% over a 9 year period. Each killing zone must extend over at least 150 square kilometres and culling must take place on 70% or more of the land inside the zone. The objective is to reduce the badger populations inside the 'cull zones' by at least 70%. Natural England will be prepared to issue licences for the pilot schemes but only if the groups of farmers and landowners provide plans meeting these criteria. The badger cull pilots will be in west Gloucestershire and west Somerset in 2012, but for

security reasons the precise areas are being kept secret. Most of the Gloucestershire cull area is around Tewkesbury and the Forest of Dean, and the Somerset zone includes part of Taunton Deane. Culling will begin in August for an initial period of six weeks and further areas will follow. Costs and funding for the cull or kill, and the associated police security operations remain murky.

Political excuses

Interviewed on BBC TV's Countryfile by John Craven on 15 January 2012, Prime Minister David Cameron tried to justify his stance on Bovine TB and the badger cull which the coalition government means to carry out. Some £4m will be spent on the two trials, in part because of the number of activists who are expected to try to frustrate the shooting of the badgers. In fact Cameron demonstrated that the decision is inherently politically-based rather than scientifically sound. He acknowledged that Badger cull trials would not end the difficulties, and that there were concerns over policing. However, the Prime Minister insisted that despite the concerns of wildlife campaigners the two pilot schemes which are intended to control the spread of bovine TB were "...the right thing to do". He claimed that the protesters against the decision to cull badgers were forgetting that the species also suffers from this "terrible" disease. He went on: "I think it is right to take this difficult step to have these pilots – we are going to have to watch very closely about how they are put in place, how they are carried out, but in the end the aim is healthy cattle, healthy badgers". Mr Cameron accepted the trials could be difficult to police, but insisted "...the question we faced as a Government is when you have got all this evidence that culling should be part of - only part of - a balanced package of measures, do you just sweep it under the carpet and announce another review or do you say OK, we need to get on and see if we can make this work?" So the essence of his argument was that now is the time for action. But with badgers the reality is complicated and a quick-fix scenario favoured by Cameron is really a non-starter.

A strategic alternative

From a conservation viewpoint I believe that there is a need to work more closely with the dairy farming industry and to develop a long-term, sustainable solution. This should be a strategic approach to working with badgers and with dairy farming. At present, the badger is in many ways the victim of Bovine TB but is being turned into the villain, because in our blame-culture society, someone or something ultimately has to be held to be at fault. Observation and common-sense suggest that badgers contract Bovine TB through feeding on insects, worms and other invertebrates in and around dung-pats from infected cattle. Clearly too, the badger numbers in some areas such as south-west England, are causing concerns for some, though by no means all, farmers. Management of farm hygiene and sensitive management of badger populations seems to be the approach to take in order to resolve the problem long-term. However, such a strategy would not be a one-off, but a long-term on-going commitment. Tax-payers money is being spent and the present approach may satiate a few appetites for action but it won't solve the problem. Funding needs to be made available to help farmers improve farm hygiene, to restrict badger access to parts of farms with dairy cattle, to remove

cowpats from fields where badger activity is a problem, and perhaps controversially, to arrange for problem setts to be closed. The intention of the latter would be to restrict and reduce badger encroachment into sensitive dairy farm areas. Badgers are highly territorial animals with sometimes long-term clan colonies. The resources within their patch will lead to long-term population stabilisation and pressure to move out and into new areas. Sometimes this means conflict with dairy farmers as setts move more into the working farm. If such access is effectively restrained, then classical ecology tells us that the population will to a large extent, control itself; Nature is an effective if cruel arbiter of populations and survival.

Sett management could then be undertaken by professionals who understand badger behaviour and needs, and the requirement to shoot or gas would be averted. The strategic approach would seek to reduce lines of tension between badger colonies and dairy herds. Finally, programmes of Bovine TB vaccination, for both cattle and badgers, would be implemented as a rolling programme to manage infection levels down. The bonus of this approach to badger populations, to farm hygiene and badger-proof boundaries, would be the creation of some livelihoods in rural areas: a 'win-win' situation. Indeed as I write this, in March 2012, the Bow Group, an influential conservative think tank, has called for Defra to focus on badger vaccination instead of culling.

Sending the wrong message?

Here in my own South Yorkshire we are unlikely to be directly affected by the early phases at least of these culls. However, there is a spill-over into issues nationally.

A badger caught on a trail camera in Gloucestershire at a location which may be in one of the proposed cull areas. Dry conditions through winter and early spring 2012 have presented stressed conditions for many badgers in SW England.



These measures potentially take us back into a Dark Ages of badger persecution. Having spent several decades campaigning and supporting local and regional badger groups to get our badger populations back, this is a desperate plight to be in. How can you explain to badger diggers and baiters across the region, that it is illegal for them to persecute badgers, and that they may be fined and/or imprisoned, but it is perfectly acceptable and legal for farmers in Devon to shoot badgers? I still recall talking to local gardeners and labourers in the 1970s, about how they would 'go out that weekend to do 'a job' (badger digging) for local farmers. That was their recreation and they might even get paid for doing it. They couldn't comprehend why we wanted to make what they did illegal. Now, this latest bizarre example of political expediency takes us on a giant leap back into a pre-conservation era. Furthermore, for farming as an industry, this could amount to one of the biggest PR disasters in living memory. In a world where the public and media have a big influence on grants, subsidies and support, this is not a good idea.

Reference

Rotherham, I.D. (2010) Don't badger the Badger. *ECOS* 31 (3/4), 15-17

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