

England's Wildlife Killing Fields: H.M. Government's Badger Culls Kill Scientific Honesty

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Global Research, October 03, 2013

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

When midnight comes a host of dogs and men

Go out and track the badger to his den

John Clare – The Badger

One always knows that, when government Ministers resort to defending Ministry policy in the local press, they are losing the argument with Joe Public. So it came as no surprise to read in the Gloucester Echo the justifications for the highly unpopular badger cull as [written](#) by Owen Paterson, UK Minister for the Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) – he who loves England's green and pleasant land so much that, among other environmentally unfriendly practices, he sees climate change as a business [opportunity](#), and wholeheartedly supports fracking and GM crops. And his and Defra's arguments for killing badgers are, as ever, less than scientific.



It is true that in some areas of the UK bovine TB is one of a farmer's worst fears. It can mean the loss of valuable animals, particularly when a milk herd is the result of many years of careful breeding, and inadequate compensation from the government does not make up for that emotional and financial devastation. One can understand the farmers' desperation and desire for the authorities to 'do something'. But why does the solution always have to be sought *outside* the problem? And why does the answer always have to be 'kill something'? In this case, badgers, which are blamed for the entirety of the TB problem in cattle, even though other wild animals are carriers of the disease and cattle can infect each other.

In 2007, after 10 years of study overseen by the Independent Scientific Group of both cattle and badgers, along with a comprehensive trial culling of badgers (commonly known as the [Krebs](#) study) the final report summary stated that "The ISG has concluded that, although badgers contribute significantly to the cattle disease in some parts of the country, no practicable method of badger culling can reduce the incidence of cattle TB to any meaningful extent, and several culling approaches may make matters worse. The ISG also concluded that rigidly applied control measures targeted at cattle can reverse the rising incidence of disease, and halt its geographical spread." When such measures were put in place, they did indeed reduce bovine TB.

The study found that, although culling produced a reduction of TB in cattle of around 25% in the centre of the cull area, reducing to 16% on the edges of the area, infected badgers fleeing from the cull could introduce the disease to TB-free farms outside the cull area. But as Somerset County Councillor Mike Rigby [pointed out](#), the study "did suggest that where 70% of badgers in a local area are removed, TB in cattle may be reduced by up to 16%. So, that looks like culling may be of some use, doesn't it, even if marginal? But what these bald

figures hide is that this does not represent a 16% reduction in absolute terms but a 16% reduction in the trend increase.”

The study’s sensible conclusion was that an ineffective reduction of the disease in one area was more than nullified by causing new cases elsewhere. It was for this reason they said that efforts to tackle the disease in the cattle would be more effective.

One would think that was clear enough – but not for this Government, who are fond of killing [wildlife](#). With farmers (but not all) and the National Farmers Union (NFU) clamouring for action, Defra announced plans for pilot badger culls in Somerset and Gloucestershire, regardless of public protest, scientific studies and objections from wildlife organisations. The government said science was on its side. Ignoring cattle control measures, it pointed to the fact that the Chief Scientific Advisor Sir David King had [said](#), after the publication of the Krebs study, that culling badgers was the “best option available at the moment to reduce the reservoir of infection in wildlife”. It insisted that marksmen shooting free-running badgers would be more effective than the ‘cage and shoot’ method followed by the previous trial despite evidence that the disturbance of badger populations would be far greater. But...

For a start, culling badgers only makes sense if badgers were the sole source of bovine TB, which they are not; nor do we know precisely how badgers infect cattle. A government [review](#) of available evidence said that data confirms “the largely respiratory nature of the disease in both animals and suggest that aerosol transmission is a potential major route for inter-species infection”. Put in simple English that means that a badger would have to stand in front of a cow’s lowered head and sneeze up its nostrils. Or, of course, vice versa, because it is more than possible that cattle are themselves infecting the badger population, particularly when one remembers that the estimated UK badger [population](#) is between 220,000 and 288,000, while in 2012 the [cattle](#) numbered 9.7 million.

Further, a study that confined 8 calves with badgers infected with bovine TB did find that the calves showed signs of infection – after [6 months](#) of being continually in contact with the badgers. The conclusion was that badger-to-cattle infection was possible, but not ‘particularly efficient’. No one has bothered to repeat this experiment – I can’t think why. Badgers also appear to ‘manage’ TB within their population, being able to be infected without progressing to major illness. In fact, badgers are far more likely to die from being run over by cars than from TB. An [estimated](#) 40,000-50,000 die each year in road accidents and, despite police doing what they can to stop this illegal activity, a further 10,000 are estimated to die from forms of [badger baiting](#). ‘Lamping’ (shooting at night), snaring, poisoning and damaging the badger setts, all of which are illegal, account for yet more badger deaths. One way or another, man is already killing perhaps a quarter of our entire badger population every year.

Supporting the possibility that the main problem is cattle-to-cattle infection are some figures from Hampshire. A short time ago, knowing that Paterson has every intention of rolling out a whole programme of badger culls across the country, Hampshire County Council voted to [ban](#) any culling on Council-owned land. (This would effectively block any cull in Hampshire, as *all* landowners within a cull area have to agree to the cull.) Although incidents of TB in cattle there are low, they are increasing year by year, from only 7 cases in 2009 to 33 in the first half of this year, and *no* TB has been found in the badger population.

It really is time to address the fact that it is the cattle that are the major carriers of this disease, and the cattle that need vaccinating. Suggestions have been made that we

vaccinate the badgers. The difficulty of trapping all the badgers in order to vaccinate them would make it an expensive operation and would, again, be highly disruptive, with the possibility of infected badgers moving into other areas. Cattle on the other hand are a captive population.

There has always been a resistance among farmers, the NFU and Defra to vaccinating the cattle – too expensive and we don't have an effective vaccine, they cry. But testing milk herds for TB is expensive. Compensation is expensive. The badger cull is expensive. I suspect that the main reason for being so reluctant to explore this route is that it would point the finger back at the cattle and the way they are managed, for if one thing has been demonstrated, it is that better management of herds and much tighter control of cattle movements around the country and through cattle markets has a real effect on cutting the incidence of disease.

On vaccination the official [stance](#) is "... that at present it is impossible to distinguish between a BCG-vaccinated and TB-infected cow. And for this reason it is currently illegal under EU law to vaccinate cattle with the BCG jab. Work is underway to devise a DIVA test – a test that can Differentiate between Infected and Vaccinated Animals. But even when this has been fully developed, it will need to go through EU and international approval."

This, they say, will take ten years, and in the meantime badgers are infecting our cows. But they have had years to pursue this route and they haven't. Or have they? For in May this year researchers from the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency announced they had developed a DIVA test. Was that greeted with cheers from Defra? No. Owen Paterson and others went on insisting that until we could vaccinate our cows, killing badgers was the only option. Paterson has a short and very selective memory.

In 2005 he went to the United States and travelled to various places, learning how the US was coping with its bovine TB problem (and they do at least recognise that deer as well as badgers are carriers). When he came back, head stuffed full of enthusiasm and science, he wrote a long article for the Farmers Weekly, titled "*Owen Paterson MP [visits](#) the USA to discuss Bovine TB policy*". And in it, having given extensive descriptions of the wonderful science being carried out, he writes this:

"The old chestnut of vaccinating cattle leading to the difficulty of identifying vaccinates and non vaccinates has been resolved either by gamma interferon which can be targeted at antigens not in the vaccine, or by PCR as MPB70 is not in the vaccine."

The old chestnut? If American scientists had already solved this one in two different ways over eight years ago, I really think it's time to stop using it as an excuse.

Why are Defra, Paterson, the NFU and some (but certainly not all) farmers so insistent that the only way to prevent disease in cattle is to kill something else? Councillor Mike Rigby has an answer. He lives in rural Somerset and represents farmers in the Somerset cull area. Being doubtful about the efficacy of the cull he did his own research resulting in a valuable summing-up on his website. In it he came to this sad conclusion:

"Having researched the issue extensively over the last 2 weeks it seems clear to me that the badger cull has nothing to do with trying to tackle TB. This would appear to be supported by the fact that many of the cull proponents now seem to be promoting alternative arguments in favour of reducing badger population; they're eating all the

hedgehogs, they kill ground-nesting birds, they undermine our land etc. And there lies the nub of it in my view. Badgers are seen by many farmers as a pain and they would dearly like to have fewer of them digging away on their land. The case for culling to address TB is so weak I can see no other explanation."

England had and still has a long and sorry history of killing badgers, so horrifically described in John Clare's poem [The Badger](#) . Nothing changes, does it?

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