

The Badger Culls in the U.K.

A Night in the Life of a Sett Monitor – on the Front Line of the UK Badger Culls

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Global Research, June 06, 2014

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With the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) all set to restart the English badger culls that were so disastrous last year, people are beginning to question the safety of the exercise. In particular, they are looking at the poor standard of policing.

Admittedly, trying to police an unfamiliar rural area at night, with emotions running high and men with guns and a tendency to ignore the law pitted against people who were trying to stop the badgers from being shot was never going to be an easy job. But that is no excuse for the muddle, bias and incompetence displayed by the Avon & Somerset Police last October.

11 October 2013. The first six weeks of the Somerset badger cull had finished, with such poor results that it had been extended for another four weeks. This was the first night of the extension.

It started with the shooting of a badger near Kitrow Lane, Carhampton. The badger – a photo of its [mangled corpse](#) was spread across the media in the following days – became known as “Badger 200”.

Badger 200 was shot at around 10:00 pm. Two “sett sitters” were monitoring a badger sett and its surroundings and were on the green lane known as Kitrow Lane when two shots were fired. One of the monitors screamed because the shots were so close and sudden. No cullers searched for the body but instead rapidly [drove off](#), perhaps thinking they had shot someone.

The dead badger was found by the monitors around 10:30 pm and by 11:30 pm was in the hands of Secret World Wildlife Rescue, who arranged for its post-mortem. It was going to be a long night.

In the police badger control room at Police HQ was a National Farmers Union representative and two representatives from the culling company HNV Associates, a fact made much of in the [media](#) and deplored by wildlife people. Superintendent Kevin Instance said “Having an NFU representative in the control room gave us real-time information about events on the ground...”

How accurate is “real-time” information?

At 4:00 am culling activity was to be stopped for the night and the police stood down. The culling company should by then have instructed any contractors still out in the field to pack up for the night.

But at this point, when they must have known policing was at the point of being withdrawn, cullers arrived back on the scene looking for “their” dead badger and Chris Tasker, having replaced the two monitors at 3:30 am, was patrolling the Kitrow Lane area.

4:00 am: Chris was being assaulted by two cullers who hit him around the head two or three times, knocking off his hat, head torch and glasses and repeatedly pushing a field gate against him. Chris tried to defend himself by hitting back at one of the cullers with a long-handled torch.

4:01 am: according to an audio recording in the police control room “two double crewed units” were dispatched in response to a culler in the Carhampton area reporting he had been assaulted. Just two minutes later the control room was informing one of the dispatched officers that *two* cullers had been assaulted and that a badger carcass had been “stolen”. Details of the offender’s vehicle were given and Chris Tasker identified as the registered owner.

Chris, having returned to his vehicle parked in the lane, switched on a small video recorder, phoned the badger control and asked for some support.

4:09 am: still scared and breathless, he phoned 999 and reported that he had been assaulted by two “shooters”. Such calls are always recorded. He stayed on the emergency line to the police until 4:35, updating the officer on the actions of the cullers. At one point he is heard to mutter, “Bloody hell, I feel shaky.”

4:12 am: Chris says the two men who had assaulted him were approaching his car and taking its number. In the background his vehicle registration number can be heard being reported by the contractors to their “control”. Yet the police control room already had all his details at 4:03 am.

Or had they?

Although the cullers claim they were assaulted by Chris, police records show that “the only logged matter received via the Force Service Centre (taking emergency calls) relating to the cull operation was that as reported at 04:09 hrs by Mr Tasker.”

The control room log shows that the culling company reps “verbally” reported 2 of their men had been assaulted and response teams dispatched at 4:01 am. No time is given for the verbal reporting. The audio recorder was apparently only switched on at 4:01 am when it recorded the dispatch of the police units.

Also available in the control room was an “ambient” recording system that would have picked up any background conversation between the NFU and culling reps. It was not switched on.

The search for Chris Tasker and his vehicle

By 4:13 three police cars were responding and having difficulty finding Kitrow Lane. One officer, who was from outside the area, reported “... having inoperative night vision equipment, a SatNav with a charging fault and with police radios that repeatedly kept losing their signal.” He felt “isolated and vulnerable” and the situation was confusing and “frightening”.

Chris had given details of where he was, but knowledge of his emergency call to the police did not reach the police control room until 4:20 am. Nor was that knowledge passed on to the officers searching for suspects and victims.

The officers were also delayed by chasing “protestors”, at least one of which was walking up Kitrow Lane from the other end in response to Chris’s call for support. That person was arrested and “de-arrested” two hours later (there were several incidences of de-arresting anti-cull people when it was found they hadn’t actually done anything). Two others had reached Chris within 10-15 minutes of his call for help.

A plethora of confused messages went between the control room and the police searching for the “suspect”. On two occasions the officers were instructed to “*Remember Section 11...*” with regard to searching for the dead badger.* Some 40 minutes after Chris had called them, two police cars finally arrived.

Searching Chris Tasker’s vehicle

By around 5:00 am Kitrow Lane appeared to be occupied by Chris, 2 police cars with accompanying officers, the two cullers standing nearby and one missing badger. And a lack of recognition that Chris was actually the victim.

For the police it seemed a simple matter. Cullers had reported being assaulted by a man (or men) whose vehicle registration number they also reported. This made Chris the suspect. Further, they had accused him of stealing the body of the badger they had shot – a criminal offence.

Chris, having reported being assaulted (and receiving further intimidation while in his vehicle and still on the phone to the police) was expecting help and support from the police. Instead, he found, much to his surprise and understandable irritation, that he was a “suspect”. As his recorder was still operating, it later demonstrated how confusing the situation was, for both Chris and the police.

His vehicle was searched (without following the correct procedure) and it was only then that Chris learned he had been accused of “stealing” the badger. The search included looking the glove compartment, a thermos flask and an empty crisp packet. The officer said, “*Covering all angles, aren’t I?*”

It was not until 5:20 am that one of the officers was informed by the control room radio that Chris had reported being assaulted, had given a description of his assailants, and was actually the victim. At the same time the two cullers, having hung around for some time, were reported to be leaving.

Yet at 5:36 am the police sergeant at the scene was *still* seeking clarification of Chris being the victim. Chris eventually got back to the safety of his home around 8:00 am – a very long night indeed.

Chris complained to the police and an investigation was held. The report, written by Chief Inspector Allan Spencer, acknowledges that the recording provided by Chris showed that “At no time does any officer provide Mr Tasker with the required detail and information regarding the search of his vehicle.”

5 out of 7 of Chris’s complaints against the police were upheld. No action appears to have

been taken by the police against the two men who had assaulted Chris, and who were still present when the police arrived.

Nor did any cullers come forward and say they were the ones who had been assaulted by Chris. The police bias was entirely focused on Chris. The policing of the culls, certainly on this occasion, was well below what one should expect.

What should be learnt from this sorry tale?

For a start, what is the explanation for one police recording giving Chris Tasker's details to officers responding to an assault at 4:03 am while the other police recording has the two cullers reporting his vehicle registration number at 4:12 am? Was the timing of one of the recordings wildly out?

Or had other cullers, having found Chris's unattended vehicle parked on Kitrow Lane, radioed in to their reps in the police control room a false report of an assault along with the registration number? There is something seriously wrong.

With culling company reps sitting in the police control room it is all too easy to get your accusation in first. Police records should be checked to see just how many recorded emergency calls made by anti-cull people reporting assaults, harassment or intimidation were pre-empted by cullers being able to make counter accusations of assault that went directly to the police control room.

It now appears from the Gloucester Police Force's experience of policing the cull in their area that, of all the accusations made by cullers of assaults on them by protesters, only one possible case might go to court. In many instances cullers, while eager to accuse, refused to identify themselves or provide statements.

Anti-cull people, on the other hand, are very willing to provide statements – and recorded evidence. What they do not have are any guns. Avon & Somerset Police should take note.

* A power to search either a person or vehicle (with regards to the badger) could be derived from either within the provisions of PACE (The Police and Criminal Evidence Act) or under Section 11 of the Protection of Badgers Act 1972. Although there is a specific power to search for any dead badger (or part of) under the Badger Act the provisions under PACE could also apply in that officers would in all effects be searching for stolen property.

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