

The English Badger Cull: Misrepresentation and Falsehoods

By [Lesley Docksey](#)

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The British Government seems as determined as ever to pursue its policy of killing badgers to prevent TB in cattle. This despite the “[complete failure](#)” of the pilot culls to reach their targets, the [leaked information](#) from the as yet unpublished report from the Independent Expert Panel and the slow but steady fall of the incidence of TB in English cattle due, not to dead badgers, but to tighter testing and cattle movement regulations.

But an increasing number of MPs, from all political parties, are demanding an end to the culls. The pro-cull lobby counter this with patronising statements about knowing that “this is an emotive subject” and have they considered the poor farmers coping with the devastating effects of bovine TB?

A silly question. All those against the culls are aware of the problems of bTB in our cattle and almost all are very sympathetic to those farmers dealing with it in their herds. But any measures to cut the incidence of bTB must be truly science-based, which the culls have proved not to be. All resources should go into funding a reliable vaccination scheme for cattle (there is already an injectable vaccine for badgers) and implementing a much stricter testing and bio-security regime, not wasted on ineffective killing sprees.

MPs debate the culls and the search for an effective bTB eradication programme

On more than one occasion MPs have gathered to debate the issue of bTB and badger culls,

The [debate](#) in October 2012 was the result of a petition launched by Brian May on the government website. The rules state that any petition that gets 100,000-plus signatures [could](#) be debated by Parliament. Brian May’s petition got over 300,000 signatures. The anti-cull MPs won the vote by 147 to 28. But the very democratic Environment Secretary Owen Paterson has made it clear that votes will not dictate government policy.

[A further debate](#) took place in July 2013. [Yet another](#) took place in Westminster Hall last December, in which the Shadow Farming Minister called for any further culls to be put to a vote in Parliament to test their democratic legitimacy. He said, “There has been no vote whatsoever on the extended culls, which is an affront to parliamentary democracy on so controversial an issue.”

The [latest debate](#) took place on March 13, and there was a marked difference between this and the Westminster Hall debate last December. This time the anti-cull MPs had really done their homework, pressing for a more effective programme to eradicate TB in cattle and

coming out with fact after fact to refute the tired and baseless reasons for the cull presented by the other side.

And were those reasons tired! Hadn't we heard them all before and proved them wrong? But when determined on a course of unpopular and wrong-headed action, Ministers and MPs the world over seem to think that if you repeat something often enough it will become the truth.

An example of the nonsense produced to defend the culls:

“...we have to recognise that the number of new cases of bovine TB is on the rise; it is doubling every nine years.”

This on the day after the latest government figures showed that last year the number of cattle slaughtered because of TB had dropped [by nearly 14%](#) . Furthermore, over the last 11 years, after the foot and mouth outbreak that led to a collapse of TB testing, a restocking of farms with untested cattle, leading to a massive increase in bTB, that number has never been doubled.

If any research should be done, it should focus on why these numbers spiked so drastically in 2008 - from 26,882 to 39,007. Was this the result of the culling carried out in the RBC trials, more intensified farming with larger herds or ever-greater movements of animals?

The same MP also made a valuable point:

“That many of us now live metropolitan lifestyles leads, regrettably, to an increasing misunderstanding of animal husbandry and welfare issues.”

Very true. If it were not, people might be debating another pressing animal husbandry and welfare problem, one that leads to many more cattle being slaughtered before their time than are lost due to TB - simple lameness.

Emotive exaggeration

“...on the humaneness issue, I know that this is a sentimental matter for many people,” said Farming Minister George Eustice.

While MPs and others who are against culling badgers are often labelled as “sentimental”, it didn't stop some pro-cull MPs doing their best to stir emotions. A Shropshire MP talked about sitting and crying with a farmer who had just watched all his cattle being taken away for slaughter.

There are many stories about farmers losing whole herds to TB, yet this is not supported by Defra's yearly statistics, where matching the number of slaughtered cattle against the number of infected herds gives an average of 4-5 cattle per herd being lost. The fact is that losing even one or two cattle has a serious and detrimental effect on both the farmer and his farm.

He also quoted Richard Yates, vice chair of the Shropshire NFU: “I have a sett in nearly every field. Badgers are out of control. You never see hedgehogs any more, or ground nesting birds, because the badgers are killing them.” What tosh!

Sadly, some farmers are ignorant about the ecology of their land. Unless Mr Yates has extremely large fields, he would not have different badger groups living that close to each other. What he has is setts with entrances in several fields. And the hedgehog and ground-nesting birds have declined due to modern farming practices, not badgers.

Withholding the evidence

Both MPs and the public have been waiting for the publication of a report from the Independent Expert Panel (IEP) on the pilot culls. It would assess, in detail, three main criteria: the humanness (can free shooting kill badgers quickly), the effectiveness (can enough badgers be killed) and the safety (just for humans, one supposes).

It was going to be published early in the New Year but publication has been inexplicably delayed. Some key findings, disastrous for the pro-cull side, were leaked in February, findings that were used by anti-cull MPs to support their case.

Pro-cull MPs made several efforts to abort the debate by insisting no debate should be held until MPs had had a chance to study the report. It emerged that the report “has just arrived on the Secretary of State’s desk. The pursuant question is why, when it was due to be published in February, it has not been published in time for today’s debate.” (Huw Irranca-Davies, Shadow Farming Minister)

This caused huge suspicion amongst the anti-cull MPs: “Perhaps it is no coincidence that the report was produced on the same day that we are holding this debate,” was one of the comments.

Tired old cherry-picked justifications

The “success” of the Irish badger cull was brought up several times. It helps to underpin the government’s belief that “There is no example anywhere in the world of a country that has successfully tackled TB without also tackling the reservoir of disease in the wildlife population.” This has been used many times by Paterson and Eustice in defence of the culls. For some people “tackling the wildlife” always means killing.

Unfortunately, the success in Ireland is not all it seems. MPs pointed out that the drop in TB incidence in Northern Ireland, where no badgers have been culled, was greater than that south of the border. There are also reports of the [Irish statistics being manipulated](#) along with cases of fraud. To top it all, the [BBC editorial rules](#) will now not allow it (or Paterson, Eustice and others) to claim that badger culling in the Republic of Ireland has reduced the incidence of TB in Irish cattle. Oops!

Much is made of badgers carrying TB. A Devon MP stated: “...about 40% of our badger population are infected with bovine TB.” His office said that this figure came from the Krebs report on the Randomised Badger Culling Trials, which apparently gave a high of 37% in TB hot spot areas like Devon.

However in the report’s evidence on the prevalence of TB in badgers the authors make it clear that, due to different methods of collecting data, with breaks in the recording of it, and all possibly tainted with bias, it is difficult to come up with any firm and reliable figures. They recommended that a continuous programme of monitoring badgers killed on roads would be the best way of obtaining more accurate figures.

The anti-cull side produced the fact that badgers are only responsible for [only 6% of cattle infection](#). Curiously, this serious study, having found that only 6% of infected cattle are infected by badgers, then went on to claim that really, badgers were still responsible for 50% of cattle TB!

And a [report for Viva!](#) says:

“... since the mid-1970s tens of thousands of badgers have been killed in an attempt to control the disease. Despite this, post-mortem examinations revealed that more than 80 per cent of those badgers were disease-free, and in some areas of high bTB incidences in cattle, no badgers were infected. A Defra survey from 2002 to 2004 found that six out of seven badgers killed on roads in areas of high infection were also free of the disease.”

Another MP insisted that:

“What the randomised cull did do was reduce the amount of TB in those areas by some 28% or 29%, which shows that the controlling and culling of badgers does work.”

But, as one anti-cull MP reminded the House, the actual conclusion of the Krebs report was:

“After careful consideration of all the RBCT and other data presented in this report, including an economic assessment, we conclude that badger culling cannot meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB in Britain.”

The government case as presented by the Farming Minister

“We got on top of TB in the 1960s and '70s by pursuing a badger cull strategy.”

Not true. TB in cattle was almost eradicated by 1971, through a regime of rigorous testing and biosecurity measures – and NO CULLING. 1971 was the year that the first badger infected with bTB was found. Badger culling started in 1975, but complacency over the very low incidence of infected cattle had already led to a lapse in testing and controls with the inevitable rise in TB incidence.

“The RBC trials that the previous Government ran also showed a 16% reduction in the disease.”

Not true, no matter how many times they say it. It showed a 16% reduction in the *increase* of TB incidence. It also showed a rise in TB outside the cull area, due to perturbation.

Look how hard we're working ...

“I agree with hon. Members that improving the control of cattle movements is an important tool in the fight against TB, but I simply point out that we have done a lot already. We now have annual testing in the high-risk area, and four-yearly testing across the whole country.”

But please don't mention Wales, where they have had annual testing since 2008, as well as tough cattle movement controls, with [good results](#) – a 33% drop in cattle slaughtered and a 23% drop in infected herds. Plus, of course, badger vaccination rather than culling.

“As I said, we are spending £1.6 million a year developing an oral vaccine (for badgers).”

True. And some of the many badger vaccination programmes popping up all over the country are being funded by Defra. But please don't mention that this government [cancelled](#) 5 out of 6 badger vaccination trials in 2010. And don't mention the drop in funding for the cattle vaccine research either. And... For the umpteenth time...

“There is no example anywhere in the world of a country that has successfully tackled TB without also tackling the reservoir of disease in the wildlife population.”

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Articles by: [Lesley Docksey](#)

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