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**BRITAIN**

Badger baiting

# THE PROBLEM WITH BRITAIN'S BADGERS

*By Doug Lucyshyn*

In 1971, a Gloucestershire farmer found a badger that had died of bovine tuberculosis. The farmer's cattle had been infected with bovine TB and he made a link between the two. Within a few years, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) began killing Britain's badgers to eradicate this wildlife reservoir of disease. Over the intervening years a number of different measures have been tried to control the disease in cattle by culling badgers. None of these have been entirely successful.

In fact, people have been killing Britain's badgers since medieval times as a source of sport and public entertainment. Although badger baiting was made illegal in 1835, the 'sport' of badger digging remained legal. Badger digging, snaring, trapping, poisoning, lamping, shooting and destruction of their setts have been ongoing for centuries. Badger digging continued to be so popular that in the 1960's the badger population was believed to be under threat and in decline.



## Badger baiters

There are two types of badger baiters. The first do it just for the pleasure of killing the badger on the spot and no money is involved. If it's lucky the badger will be shot, but usually the men will set their snarling terriers on the badger and watch it suffer a long and agonizing death, stabbing it with shovels for good measure. At times, the dogs and the badgers may die when the sett collapses and suffocates them. (Many badger groups have fortified their local setts with concrete to protect the badgers.)

The second type of badger baiting

involves gambling where large sums of money can change hands. The badger is dug out of the sett in the manner described above and then it is put in a bag and taken away to be baited later on. The badger is taken somewhere quiet; for example a barn, shed or cellar, and placed into a makeshift arena, a ring or pit, from which it cannot escape. Dogs are then set upon it. Even if the badger is lucky enough to get the better of one dog, the owner may hit or otherwise injure the badger in order to 'protect his pet'. Ultimately, no matter how well it tries to defend itself, the badger's fate is sealed. The badger, through injury and exhaustion, will not be able to fight any longer. The baiters will then kill the badger usually by clubbing or shooting it. Gambling is always involved and a winning dog's value will rise – along with the price of its puppies. An anonymous letter received by Michael Sharratt of Badger Watch & Rescue Dyfed states that badgers are being caught and sold for about £500 (1,000 US) for baiting.



## Lamping, snaring and poison

Lamping is the hunting of animals at night with the aid of bright lights – badgers are dazzled while they are feeding on fields. Some 'lampers' use lurchers or other similar dogs to take the quarry that they dazzle while others mount their spotlights on high-powered firearms and simply shoot their victims.

Snaring badgers and other protected species is prohibited in section 11 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, but this is difficult to enforce as long as some

snaring is legal. The use of self-locking snares is prohibited under this Act but the use of free-running snares is permitted to catch foxes and rabbits provided they are inspected at least once every 24 hours. The free running snare is intended as a restraining device and should not, if used lawfully, normally cause bodily injury. Snares or traps are indiscriminate and often catch badgers when they are not the intended victims (although illegal in the UK, self-locking snares are still used and cause severe injuries to a variety of animal species – caught by the neck or round the body the animal struggles to get free causing the snare to tighten and cut deeper into the animal's flesh causing a lingering, painful death).

Some landowners and gamekeepers use poisoned baits to catch predators of game and livestock. However, like snares, poisons can cause great suffering and are indiscriminate, often killing animals other than the intended victims. Badgers are also gassed by accident when inexperienced pest controllers mistake badger setts for rabbit warrens. However, without doubt, the deliberate gassing of badger setts does occur. The Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 prohibits the use of unapproved products to deter or kill animals, including badgers. The only repellent approved for use to deter badgers is Renardine. If used at the sett, rather than on lawn, for example, a licence is required. Otherwise, there will be an offence of sett interference.

Landowners who, for one reason or another, want to rid their land of



*Why, Master Surge, do you expect that little thing to draw the Badger?*

badgers, will sometimes target badger setts. There have been several occasions when strong substances such as slurry or diesel oil have been poured into sett entrances to kill badgers by drowning them. Every year, there are cases of setts being damaged or destroyed.

## Protection

*The Badger Act 1973* (amended in 1981 and 1985), was designed to stop widespread persecution of the species while allowing the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) to issue licences to individuals to kill badgers to

prevent the spread of disease. By 1975 there were concerns about the lack of controls on who could kill badgers, so MAFF decided that only its own staff, or people under its control, would be able to cull badgers to stop the spread of TB. Gassing was the method used. This was permitted under The Conservation of Wild Creatures and Wild Plants Act 1975. At that time, the legislation protected badgers but not their setts, and so, in October 1991, a further *Badger Protection Act* was introduced to protect badger setts as well. The Protection of Badgers Act 1992, consolidated and improved previous legislation. This protection has always been acknowledged to be welfare-based: that is, it is intended to defend the species against cruelty such as badger baiting rather than to conserve it for ecological reasons.

## Historical overview of bovine TB

Bovine TB is caused by *Mycobacterium bovis*, a bacillus similar to *M. tuberculosis* which causes the form of TB more common in humans. In Britain during the 1930s, 35 000 people a year died from TB, 2,500 of them from *M. bovis*. About 40 per cent of cows were infected. Today, the combination of modern antibiotics, pasteurized milk and the slaughter of infected cattle has made bovine TB rare among humans.

In 1935, the ministry introduced a skin test to detect bovine TB in cattle, and began killing infected animals. This scheme was very successful. By 1960 all areas of Britain were officially declared 'attested', meaning that the disease in cattle had declined to a



SEP 9, 1835

## ACT TO PREVENT CRUELTY TO ANIMALS

*THE following is the purport of several clauses of an Act to consolidate and amend the laws relating to the cruel and improper treatment of animals, and to make other provisions in regard thereto, passed the 9th of September, 1835. Any person wantonly and cruelly beating or otherwise ill-treating any cattle, horse, ass, &c. or improperly driving the same, whereby any mischief shall be done, shall, upon conviction, be ...*



negligible level.

By the mid-1970s, only 0.1 per cent of herds in most of England and Wales had cattle which reacted positively to the test. Between 1970 and 1972, a MAFF field study in west Cornwall attempted to pinpoint the cause of the disease. Its authors recommended that wildlife should be examined to see if any species was a reservoir for the disease. At this point, the Gloucestershire farmer linked the dead badger to his infected cattle.

MAFF concluded that badgers were the source of the problem. In 1975 it set up its consultative panel on badgers and tuberculosis, and began using hydrogen cyanide to gas all badgers within one kilometre of an infected herd. Within four years, public opinion forced the government to declare a year-long moratorium on killing badgers, and review its policy. It asked Solly Zuckerman, the government's chief scientific adviser until the early 1970s, to look at the problem.

### The Zuckerman review

Many people were still not convinced that badgers spread the disease and felt that gassing was an inhumane way of controlling them, so, in 1980, Lord Zuckerman was asked to review the problem. Gassing operations stopped at the start of the review.

Zuckerman concluded that badgers were probably a significant source of bTB infection and that the high density and close proximity of cattle and badgers in parts of southwest England made spread of the disease easy. Because the disease seemed to have spread since controls stopped at the start of the review, he advised that control measures should start again. As gassing was considered inhumane, cage trapping, followed by shooting, became the method of killing badgers.

Zuckerman advised that areas should be cleared of infected badgers and kept clear, so from 1982 to 1985 a 'clean ring' strategy applied. Under this strategy, social groups of badgers on and around the breakdown farm were identified, trapped and a sample of carcasses from these groups were examined. Where infection was found, all badgers in the social group were removed. The ring extended out until groups with uninfected badgers were found. Trapping took place in the cleared area for a further six months to keep the area clean.

Zuckerman had recommended a further review in three years time. This was conducted by Professor Dunnet in 1986, who concluded that some form of badger control was unavoidable. He

recommended the use of an interim strategy until there was:

- a) sufficient data from research and badger removal operations for a further substantive review, and
- b) development of a reliable live diagnostic test for bTB in badgers.

### Interim strategy

This policy was introduced in 1986 and involved the removal and culling of badgers only from farms where a TB incident had been confirmed and where, following investigation, it was thought that badgers were the most likely cause of the disease.

During the operation of the interim strategy, the annual incidence of bTB has increased in southwest England and has occurred in other areas with no recent history of infection, including the West Midlands and South Wales.

Meanwhile, a trial of a live badger diagnostic test was conducted between 1994 and 1996, but was stopped

because of the poor sensitivity of the test and problems associated with the trial.

Because of the continued increase in TB in cattle, it was clear by 1996 that the interim strategy was not working so the government asked Professor John Krebs to carry out a further review.

Krebs concluded that:

*"the sum of evidence strongly supports the view that, in Britain, badgers were a significant source of infection in cattle...It is not, however, possible to state quantitatively what contributions badgers make to cattle infection"*

Krebs and his team recognized, however, that scientific data were lacking and recommended that an experiment, the Randomised Badger Culling Trial (RBCT) be set up to establish the effect of culling badgers on TB in cattle.

### The latest news

In early July of 2008 the government decided against a cull of badgers in England to control the spread of TB in cattle. Environment secretary Hilary Benn told MPs that there is a risk a cull could make matters worse.

His decision followed a review of evidence from scientists and farming, veterinary and wildlife organizations. Last year, a report from the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (ISG) concluded that "badger culling cannot meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB".

Mr. Benn said that his decision is in line with ISG advice and the government will not issue any licences to farmers to cull badgers for TB control. He added that the government remains "open to the possibility of revisiting this policy under exceptional circumstances, or if new scientific evidence were to become available".

"While such a cull might work, it might also not work. It could end up making the disease worse if it was not sustained over time or delivered effectively, and public opposition, including the unwillingness of some landowners to take part, would render this more difficult," Mr. Benn said.

"I do not think it would be right to take this risk."

The announcement is sure to dismay the farming community, with the National Farmers Union stating that it may hold a protest against a no-cull decision.

And so it goes for Britain's badgers...loved by some, despised by others...and safe once more...for the time being at least.☺



**The Badger Trust promotes the conservation and welfare of badgers and the protection of their setts and habitats. They are the leading voice for badgers and represent and support around 80 local voluntary badger groups. The Badger Trust provides expert advice on all badger issues and works closely with MPs, the police and other conservation and welfare organizations. The Badger Trust has posters and leaflets for their 'Killed or Saved?' campaign that encourages the public to write to their MP's. [www.badger.org.uk](http://www.badger.org.uk)**