

The New York Times<http://nyti.ms/1nLAI1o>ZACH
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ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Badger Hunts Divide Britons

OCT. 1, 2014

Green Column

By **STANLEY REED**

GLASSHOUSE, England — “You can tell how outraged people are, if they are willing to spend their evenings like this,” David Carter said as we stood at the edge of a freshly plowed field, peering into the darkness for signs of badger shooters.

Mr. Carter, a retired schoolteacher, was one of a group of four people who had spent three hours on a recent night picking their way through the cornfields and woods in Gloucestershire, about 110 miles northwest of London, listening to the hoots of owls and the hoarse, eerie barks of foxes.

The government of Prime Minister David Cameron has chosen this area of rolling farmland and Cotswold stone houses to test whether killing hundreds of badgers — 70 percent or more of the estimated local population — will help eradicate bovine tuberculosis, a wasting disease that has become a major problem for Britain’s cattle industry. The government plans to hold these autumn culls for four years.

Mr. Carter, who lives in North Staffordshire, a three-hour drive away, was spending a week in Gloucestershire at his own expense and going out every night to register his disapproval of killing the black-and-white creatures, which are among Britain’s largest mammals. “You’ve got to stand out and make a statement,” he said.

The killing of badgers is creating an emotional split in the English

countryside. On one side are farmers, who say they should have a freer hand with their land, including the ability to control wild animals that they think are threatening their livelihoods.

But conservationists, including some badger experts, say the government-authorized cull is a cruel and pointless exercise. While there is little doubt that badgers can be infected with tuberculosis and transmit it, the conservationists say that practices in the cattle industry are the main cause of an increase in the disease. It is believed that the tuberculosis passes to cattle from the urine and droppings of badgers.

Opponents of badger killing are playing a cat-and-mouse game in the night with marksmen who are hunting the badgers. The purpose of our patrol was ostensibly to rescue badgers hit by gunshots, but in reality there was little chance of finding such an animal, because an injured badger tends to retreat to its burrow, or sett, said Mark Jones, a former executive director of the British wing of the Humane Society International.

Instead, the real aim of the night walk was to protest the cull and to possibly disrupt it just by being there. The hunters, who are said to be armed with high-powered rifles and night-vision devices, are prohibited from shooting in the vicinity of people. "Just having people out walking the footpaths in the proximity of badger setts" can have a direct impact on the cull efforts, said Dr. Jones, a veterinarian who took part in the patrol, which was organized by a group called Gloucestershire Against Badger Shooting.

The patrol also encountered a car full of people who call themselves hunt saboteurs and who say they deliberately try to obstruct and otherwise harass the shooters.

The presence of the protesters may have been partly responsible for the cull's failing last year to come close to the 70 percent goal considered to be effective against the spread of tuberculosis from badgers to cattle.

Despite that failure and the concern that some of the badgers suffered too long before dying, the government authorized contractors, who are paid by the local landowners, to shoot from 600 to 1,100 badgers in the area this year, as well as hundreds more in West Somerset.

The Conservative Party-led government is under enormous pressure from its constituents in the countryside to do something about bovine tuberculosis, which has increased alarmingly in recent years. Southwest England, where Gloucestershire is located, is the area hardest hit. The rate of infection in herds there has risen to 9 percent from 1.5 percent in 1995, according to the government. The opposition Labour party, which draws its support more from urban populations and the northern part of Britain, has criticized the cull and seems likely to abandon the tactic if it wins a general election scheduled for next year.

Minette Batters, deputy president of the National Farmers Union, said that farmers live in fear of the disease's turning up in their animals. "You are always rolling the dice, wondering what is going to happen," she said. "When the vet says you have a positive, it is as devastating as can be."

Cattle that test positive for the disease are killed, and government compensation — a total of about 34 million pounds, or \$55 million, in 2012, the latest figure available — does little to soften the blow, according to Ms. Batters, who raises beef cattle in Wiltshire, in the high-risk zone. "It is the beginning of the end of your business," she said.

Robin Hargreaves, president of the British Veterinary Association, said the disease was "very serious and, more importantly, getting worse." While troubled by the problems with last year's cull, he said that in his judgment, the disease would never be wiped out without tackling the reservoirs of tuberculosis in badgers, although he conceded that badger-to-cattle transmissions were most likely only about 5 percent of the total. "If we retain a high level in the wildlife population, it will feed back into cattle," he said.

Some scientists who have studied interactions between badgers and cattle for years say the culls are poorly thought-out exercises that may do more harm than good. One problem: Killing badgers breaks down their social groups, causing them to move more and potentially increasing the spread of disease.

"Culling badgers is a really risky approach to curing cattle TB," said Rosie Woodroffe, a badger ecologist at the Zoological Society of London.

“The last thing you want to do is make it worse.”

Other researchers say that the government and the agriculture industry should focus first on halting the spread of disease among cattle and then, if the tuberculosis persists, deal with the badgers, ideally through vaccination. They point to overcrowding and the widespread trading of cattle as invitations to disease.

“When you sit back and look at the facts, we’ve allowed disease to run rampant in cattle, ” said Chris Cheeseman, a retired veterinarian and government scientist. “Badgers are a distraction from that problem.”

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