

English vets respect Wales' badger cull

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SIR – Amongst a very large number of farm vets having to deal with the TB epidemic in cattle in the South West of England and in many other areas, there is a considerable interest as well as a huge respect for the way in which the Welsh Government is facing the realities of the TB dilemma and showing the integrity to address them realistically.

This contrasts markedly with the approach this side of the border where our invertebrate politicians have vacillated and procrastinated about taking any action against badgers.

They are really waiting to see what happens in Wales.

Several years ago I retired from the Veterinary Investigation Service of Maff (now Defra) as director for Devon and Cornwall.

I had specialised in tuberculosis for over 25 years and on retirement I was appointed as Independent Adviser on TB to the Government's Chief Scientist's Group until 2005 when I resigned. I considered Maff had totally lost its way over TB and would not heed advice from their own experienced staff.

During my time with Maff, working as a veterinary pathologist, I examined in excess of 3,000 badgers post mortem. This comprised RTA deaths, deaths from natural causes and animals killed on farms in association with outbreaks of TB in the cattle. Of the middle category almost half the deaths from natural causes amongst adults were from tuberculosis.

I can assure any doubters that TB in badgers is a most serious and highly infectious disease. Because of the higher load of TB bacteria in the pathological reaction in the badger, disease in badgers tends to be considerably more infectious than in cattle.

Cattle in problem areas are tested annually, but badgers remain untouched and disease takes an unfettered progress.

In the final few months diseased badgers show a massive outpouring of TB bacteria in the sputum, lung discharges, faeces and urine which heavily contaminates the pasture habitat shared with cattle and all other mammals which might use that habitat.

Badgers were made a protected species in 1973 and since that time numbers of badgers have increased enormously.

Badgers are in no way an endangered species.

With the last veterinary advised culling programme being stopped by the minister in 1986, when there was a total of 80 outbreaks in the entire country, "politically advised" control then followed involving partial culling with obvious dispersal of badger sett groups.

This resulted in a worsening situation with outbreaks increasing by about 18% year on year. Sadly the situation in the South West of England as well as the West Midlands and now many other areas has become very serious with over 3,000 outbreaks. But official action against the known host is still not happening.

Tuberculosis in badgers was considered the source of approximately 90% of outbreaks of TB in cattle in the South West of England according to Maff annual reports up to 1995.

Movement of infected cattle accounted for most of the rest. The situation in Devon and Cornwall is still much the same pattern although worse, 10 years later, with almost 95% of outbreaks due to infected badgers.

Conservation of a species such as badgers means taking responsibility for its survival by ensuring a healthy population for the future. To promote the spread of a serious notifiable disease, such as tuberculosis, amongst badgers by doing nothing to remove diseased communities is a derogation of that responsibility.

But this disease not only affects badgers but also the other wildlife and domestic species sharing the habitat used by badgers such as deer, cattle, goats, alpacas, sheep and pigs. It has also been found in dogs, cats and ferrets. It is neither rational nor wise for us to do nothing. And trying to control a heavily diseased population by partial vaccination is doomed to failure. Selective culling of diseased populations is unfortunately the only way forward.

That was the message sent to Margaret Beckett in 2005 when she was Secretary of State for Defra by a total of 420 vets, most of whom were in farm practice. When you consider there are only now about 1,000 vets in farm practice that is the considered opinion of a high proportion. We all signed a letter stating there will no chance of controlling TB in cattle unless TB diseased badgers were culled. Our entreaty for action was dismissed. But at least you are fortunate in Wales in having a listening minister.

DR JOHN GALLAGHER , Yelverton, Devon.