James Barrington

Animal welfare

To cull or not to cull

June 21, 2013 by jamesbarrington

Earlier this month a debate on the badger cull was held at the Cheltenham Science Festival...which may be surprising to some people. Surprising, in that a debate was necessary because according to the recently elected vice-president of the RSPCA Brian May, “The entire scientific community of the country has said this will not work.”

This is patently not true of course, as the organisers of the festival debate recognised and which resulted in 81% of the audience voting in favour of a cull. Yet while scientific opinion certainly differs on the trials involving the culling of badgers, it may not necessarily be along the lines that the anti-cull groups would have you believe. In April DEFRA Chief Scientific Advisor Ian Boyd brought together 60 or so scientists at the Royal Society to debate the issues involved, saying that scientific views were not as far apart as some reports have stated.

![Anti badger cull demonstrators make their point](http://jamesbarrington.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/badger-demo.jpg)

What has happened in the debate over how to tackle bovine TB is that instead of a calm and rational analysis of the various problems and difficulties faced by farmers and wildlife conservationists (and perhaps all of us in the longer term), the argument has been hijacked by those who want to see the situation in simplistic terms - just as they did in the hunting debate. One is either ‘for or against’ and of course those in favour of a cull have to be demonised. Today, this ‘them
and us’ attitude is a very easy thing to create, especially on an emotive animal issue and with internet specialists who can muster wide, but often uninformed, public support. The coalition government didn’t help itself by creating a situation in which 100,000 signatures on an e-petition can trigger a parliamentary debate and certain sections of the media, too, have been selective their reports. Unsurprisingly, some politicians have made this a party political issue, forgetting that the previous government had years to address this escalating problem.

The reality is that scientific opinion falls into various camps; those for the government’s plan, those for a cull, but against free shooting, those wishing to go down a vaccination route and those against any form of cull etc. The proposed trials do not rely solely on killing badgers, they include vaccination as well as improvements in cattle movements and bio-security – that’s why they’re called ‘ pilot trials’ – but for some any form of killing is an anathema. Consequently, uncomfortable facts, awkward situations and difficult questions can be dismissed in the knowledge that the British public will not fully understand or engage with the problem, but will certainly join in an “animal protectors vs. animal abusers” battle.

Vaccination as opposed to culling will always win out in the public mind, but the efficacy of the Badger BCG vaccine, despite claims to the contrary, is not fully proven. An oral vaccine for badgers is in the pipeline, as is a vaccine for cattle, but these will take years to produce and approve. Vaccinating badgers sounds simple, but live cage trapping thousands of animals to be individually injected is a time-consuming and costly process and ensuring that all badgers in an area are caught cannot be guaranteed. The process will have to be carried out each year. Bio-security also appears sensible and this is happening, but how are farmers expected to keep badgers away from cattle which generally graze in open fields? Or are we looking to incarcerate all cattle in factory farms?

Views on the role of cattle movement in spreading bovine TB vary, but as Dr Roger Blowey indicated during the Cheltenham debate, the different strains of bovine TB found in cattle in given areas match the strains found in badgers in those areas, as shown in the diagram. Had cattle movements been an influencing factor in spreading the disease, the picture would indicate a sporadic mix of those strains. It is also the case that cattle to cattle transmission of the disease is rarely seen in the field – usually only two or three animals are affected in herd breakdowns. The disease does not sweep through a herd as would Foot & Mouth disease. It is actually very hard to transmit the disease experimentally from clinically infected donor animals to susceptible in contact animals and this is due to the closed nature of bovine TB in cattle. Cattle do not readily shed the TB bacteria into the environment. The exact opposite is the case of the disease in badgers, many of which become what’s known as ‘super excretors’.
All the time incidents of bovine TB in cattle are escalating - up from 605 cases in 1983 to over 37,500 cases last year. And, as Professor James Wood, an infectious diseases researcher at Cambridge University said at the Royal Society meeting, “The other thing that is often left out of the equation is that this is a nasty disease for badgers as well.”

It was to highlight this fact that the Veterinary Association for Wildlife Management produced a short film showing the effects of the disease in badgers and it doesn’t make comfortable viewing.

See: www.vet-wildlifemanagement.org.uk

So it is odd to hear people who are opposed to any cull and who are concerned about badger welfare disregard this fact. Here’s what a spokesman for the Badger Trust said recently, “Clearly if any animal gets TB it suffers – rabbits get it, domestic cats get it, they all suffer. Why badgers should be picked out this way is incomprehensible and unscientific.” Pauline Kidner, one of the speakers against the cull at the Cheltenham debate dismissed the issue of badgers suffering because all animals in the wild die awful deaths. It seems that provided no human is involved, the deaths of these creatures at the hand of nature is acceptable, no matter how much they suffer. Presumably, even if infected animals could be identified, these people would still be against a cull. This prompts the question how do they see the reservoir of bovine TB in badgers ever being curbed or eradicated?

Whether or not free shooting is the right way forward will continue to be a matter for debate, but it does seem odd that the animal rightists who have joined this battle saw nothing wrong in arguing that shooting was a perfectly acceptable alternative to hunting with hounds when the Hunting Act was being debated and some still use the line in arguments against repeal.

“Given the choice of being pursued until your muscles are paralysed and then ripped apart by hounds; or shot with a bullet, with the chance of an instant death, which would you choose?” Brian May

“There is not absolute proof that wounded foxes suffer” RSPCA

“The most widespread method of fox culling is shooting, and this is widely perceived to be the most effective by practitioners. It is humane and extremely effective.” Professor Stephen Harris

“If a particular fox was posing a problem to a farmer, then the most humane way of dealing with it would be for a skilled marksman to shoot it with a rifle.” IFAW

“Provided that shooting is carried out by a professional marksman at the correct range with a suitable weapon and ammunition (preferably a rifle fitted with a telescopic sight) this must be the most humane method of killing.” League Against Cruel Sports

Views on shooting foxes. Fine for the fox, but not for the badger.
What is at the heart of this problem is the lack of management of the badger population. That statement will infuriate certain individuals and groups, but the basis for complete protection for an animal when its numbers are high is simply not there. As a consequence, other species can suffer losses. The once common hedgehog is fast becoming a rarity and the rise in badger numbers is clearly a factor.

The animal rights lobby pick and choose their campaigns as easily as they pick and choose the arguments that suit them. Why is it accepted that the various species of deer, including many healthy animals, can be culled in their tens of thousands every year? Why is it that the culling of foxes is generally accepted? It goes without saying that the methods chosen for such culls have to be humane (I and many others would advocate a law to underpin that situation), but problems such the bovine TB in badgers, and indeed mange in urban foxes, are symptoms of a lack of management.

Surely what most people want for the wide variety of species of our wildlife is a healthy population at acceptable levels. Wildlife management, as Dr Stephen Tapper says in his book *A Question of Balance*, has to be the key to achieving this, not blind protectionism.

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**Uncharitable acts**

May 28, 2013 by jamesbarrington

Everybody has a good, if not precisely accurate, idea of what constitutes a charity.

The work carried out by charitable bodies not only compliments that which is undertaken by government and local authorities, but in some cases substitutes for it. Yet the line between what should and shouldn’t be a charity (and what activities they are allowed to assume) has become blurred over decades and that has consequences far wider than just extra pounds in donations via ‘Gift Aid’.

The description of a charity is explained in the foreword to the Charities Commission document ‘Charities and Public Benefit’, “Charities are more than ‘a good thing’ and, as their supporters recognise, are special. Not all organisations can be charities. To be a charity is a mixture of what you are, what you do and how you do it. The core characteristic is public benefit. Whilst the charitable sector is enormous and very diverse, the aims of each and every charity, whatever their size, must be for public benefit. Public benefit is therefore central to the work of all charities.” It is those words, “public benefit” that should be noted.

The Charities Act 2006 defines a charity as a “body or trust which is for a charitable purpose that provides benefit to the public”. It goes on to list 13 headings that give greater details as to these purposes, including “the advancement of animal welfare”. The most well-known ‘animal charity’ in this sense is the RSPCA and the accepted view is that preventing deliberate and avoidable suffering to animals is good for society. In the main this concerns domestic animals, over which humans have control, but it is hard to see this applying in exactly the same way to wild animals that have to be