

MY WAY OF THINKING

## MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the controversy surrounding the badger cull, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

**B**adgers may have disappeared from the news – eclipsed by Brexit and climate change – but they're still being slaughtered in many parts of England and Wales.

The UK Government has authorised badger culls since 1975. First, they were gassed in their setts; now they are caught in cages (and shot) or hunted at night. During the past seven years alone, more than £60 million has been spent killing up to 130,000 badgers. It is the largest massacre of a protected species in living memory.

The reason is simple: the farming sector blames badgers for passing a highly infectious disease – bovine tuberculosis – back to cattle. Bovine TB, as it is called, is a nightmare for many farmers and costs taxpayers £100 million every year in compensation (after the compulsory slaughter of infected cattle).

But there is no conclusive evidence that badger culling reduces the incidence of TB in cattle. While some areas where culling has been trialled have seen a decrease in incidence, others have seen an increase.

The Government's own figures show that, overall, the problem is actually getting worse. In 2005, 2,305 herds were infected and 29,824 cattle were slaughtered; by 2018, the numbers had increased dramatically to 3,683 herds infected and 44,656 cattle slaughtered.

Claims that badger culling works seem to be based on cherry-picking data from the Government's own unscientific trials (incidences of bovine TB vary enormously from time to time and from one area to another, so it just picks the ones that suit its argument).

No one is denying that badgers get TB. All British mammals are susceptible to the disease. But what is so frustrating is that culling them is nothing more than a dangerous distraction.

It makes it look as if the Government is doing something constructive and avoids addressing the real problem – which is cattle-cattle transmission.

Heaven forbid suggesting that farmers themselves may be partly to blame. So, the Government ignores scientific and veterinary advice – including arguments that the cull is cruel and inhumane – and kills more badgers.

The terrible thing is that this dispute has been raging for nearly half a century. Thirty-five years ago, I wrote a 111-page report entitled *Badgers, Cattle and Bovine Tuberculosis*, which represented the views of many of the country's leading

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conservation organisations, vets and badger experts.

We recommended five courses of action that still stand today: more rigorous testing of cattle; further restrictions on the movement of high-risk cattle; tighter biosecurity on farms; cattle vaccination; and badger vaccination. If the Government had taken our advice – and the advice of countless experts since – the problem could have been solved years ago.

There is some movement in the right direction. Hundreds of determined volunteers, for example, are busy vaccinating as many badgers as they can. And the Government is investing a relatively small amount of money in developing a cattle vaccine (ultimately the long-term solution – the UK's cattle are already vaccinated for as many as 16 diseases, so why should TB be any different?).

But, meanwhile, the cull continues. Badgers are now being killed across Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Wiltshire, Somerset, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Staffordshire, Cheshire and Cumbria, with more counties likely to be added in the future (unfortunately, it feels as though the Government tries to keep the details secret).

It's a national disgrace. The badger cull should be abandoned immediately, before yet another one of our protected species completely disappears from large swathes of the countryside. 🐾

**MARK CARWARDINE** is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

 **WHAT DO YOU THINK?** If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email [wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk](mailto:wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk)

