

WE WERE DANCING IN THE streets, in March 2020, when the government announced that badger culling would be phased out over the next five years. But we should have known better. Quite the reverse, it has extended the number of cull zones and increased the number of badgers being killed.

A highly infectious disease, bovine tuberculosis is a nightmare for many farmers and costs taxpayers up to £150m every year in compensation alone (after the compulsory slaughter of more than 30,000 infected cattle). That doesn't include the tens of millions of pounds spent killing badgers.

No one is denying that badgers get bTB. But despite government claims to the contrary, there is absolutely no evidence that killing them reduces the incidence of bTB in cattle (indeed, the government's own figures demonstrate the opposite – the problem is actually getting worse). Anyone who claims otherwise is either being deliberately misleading, misinterpreting the facts or cherry-picking the data from the government's own unscientific trials (they just highlight the occasional results that best suit their argument).

Badger culling is nothing more than a dangerous distraction. It certainly doesn't help farmers. It merely makes it look as if the government is doing something constructive and avoids addressing the real problem – which is cattle to cattle transmission.

Despite inaccurate reports in the mainstream press, it's not a recent atrocity. The government has been systematically killing badgers since 1975. First, they were gassed in their setts, and now they are being trapped or hunted with rifles at night.

In fact, my first job in conservation, in the early 1980s, was to compile a 111-page report that represented the views of many of the country's leading conservation organisations, vets and badger experts. The main recommendations were clear: improved bTB testing, tighter biosecurity on farms, tougher restrictions on cattle movement, and widespread vaccination of cattle and badgers.

If the government hadn't ignored the best scientific and veterinary advice –

Conservationist Mark Carwardine is dismayed at the mass slaughter of badgers, which are a protected species



DAVID CHAPMAN/ALAMY



Natural England approved seven new badger cull zones last autumn

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MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

since endorsed by gazillions more scientific studies – the problem could have been solved years ago.

Paradoxically, it has now admitted that those conservation groups, vets and badger experts were right all along. Ministers have promised to “begin an exit strategy from the intensive culling of badgers” and (this will sound familiar) move towards “improved bTB testing, tighter biosecurity on farms, tougher restrictions on cattle movement, and widespread vaccination of cattle and badgers”.

It's not rocket science. Conservation groups have been vaccinating badgers for years (vaccination is at least 60 times cheaper than culling – and it works). Meanwhile, the UK's cattle are already vaccinated against as many as 16 other diseases, so why not

bTB? Admittedly, it's a particularly tricky vaccine to develop, but it also hasn't had the necessary investment.

Yet the government will continue to issue cull licences until the end of 2022. With each licence lasting four years, that means

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culling won't actually end until 2026 – which could lead to the deaths of another 130,000 badgers in England and Wales (Scotland has officially been bTB-free since 2009). The total number killed since lethal shooting began in 2013 already numbers about 140,000 badgers – out of an estimated overall population of some 485,000.

How can we claim to be a nation of nature-lovers when we are inhumanely slaughtering badgers – which are supposed to be protected – on such an industrial scale, for absolutely no reason? It's a national disgrace. 🐾