



Badgers in England are still being killed systematically

BADGER: RICHARD BIRCHETT



OPINION

“The Labour government should revoke all current badger cull licences with immediate effect”

MARK CARWARDINE

WILL LABOUR KEEP ITS manifesto promise to end the “ineffective” badger cull? Or, like the previous government, will it bow to the powerful farming lobby and continue the slaughter? The good news is that it’s unlikely to issue new badger culling licences. Last year Daniel Zeichner, now Labour’s Environment Minister, stated: “We are going to make England bovine TB free by 2038, but with a range of measures that do not include culling.”

Unfortunately, though, it is not that simple. There are 17 existing licences for badger culling and, despite admitting that it doesn’t work, in a rush before the election the Conservatives granted nine supplementary ones. This gives the green light for thousands more badgers to be killed across many parts of England, from Cornwall to Cumbria.

The solution is simple: the new Labour government should revoke all current badger cull licences with immediate effect. But I doubt that will happen. The new Secretary of State for the Environment, Steve Reed, made clear just before the election that they’re “not going to end any of the existing licences... we don’t want to send any sudden shocks into the system.”

Not surprisingly, campaigners are queuing up to take the government to court. One legal challenge focuses on Labour’s acknowledgement that badger culling is “ineffective”. The licences would therefore be in breach of the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, which states that a licence can be given to kill a badger “for the purpose of preventing the spread of disease”. Quite simply, if

killing badgers doesn’t prevent the spread of disease, it should be deemed unlawful.

Badgers have been killed systematically in England for half a century. First, they were gassed in their setts and now they are trapped or, more commonly, hunted with rifles at night. According to data released by Natural England in April, no fewer than 19,570 badgers were killed in 2023, bringing the total number of badgers killed under licence in the previous decade alone to 230,125 (nearly half the estimated UK population of 485,000). It is the largest massacre of a protected species in living memory.

No one is denying that badgers get TB. But despite government and farming lobby claims to the contrary, there is absolutely no evidence that killing them reduces the incidence of TB in cattle. Indeed, the government’s own figures demonstrate the opposite – the problem is getting

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worse. Anyone who claims otherwise is either lying, misinterpreting the facts or cherry-picking the data from the previous government’s own unscientific trials (they just highlight the occasional results that best suit their argument).

What is so frustrating is the pretence that culling badgers will help farmers. It hasn’t – and it won’t. It merely makes it look as if something is being done and avoids addressing the real problem, which is cattle-cattle transmission (caused by frequent trading of cattle and poor biosecurity on farms). Indeed, an astounding 94 per cent of bovine TB is spread from cattle to cattle. That’s the bottom line – farmers themselves are largely to blame.

Meanwhile, it’s telling that badgers are not being culled in Wales (which has reduced TB incidence in cattle more effectively than

→ AT A GLANCE

- The government has been culling badgers since 1975, blaming them for passing a highly infectious disease (bovine TB) to cattle.
- Bovine TB is a nightmare for many farmers and costs English taxpayers at least £34 million annually in compensation for slaughtering infected cattle (plus untold millions of pounds spent killing badgers).
- Conservationists, vets and badger experts have long argued that culling badgers doesn’t solve the problem – and is inhumane.
- In March 2022, the Conservative government acknowledged that badgers are not the culprits and promised to “begin an exit strategy from the intensive culling”.
- But the cull continues.

England), Scotland (which has been officially TB-free since 2009) or Northern Ireland (where a plan to cull up to 4,000 badgers a year was quashed in October last year by a high court judge, following a legal challenge by the Northern Ireland Badger Group and Wild Justice). Wales and Scotland, in particular, have focused on cattle measures – without culling badgers. Why can’t England do the same?

The most effective and fastest solution is undoubtedly a cattle vaccine. Yet the investment in cattle vaccines has been pitifully low, and progress pitifully slow.

If politicians hadn’t wasted decades blithely ignoring the best advice of countless expert scientists and vets, the problem could have been solved many years ago and thousands of badgers could have been saved. It’s a national disgrace. **W**

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