

Wildlife Groups and Bovine Tuberculosis, Opportunity or Threat?



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Introduction

Bovine tuberculosis (bTB) is a cattle disease of major economic and zoonotic significance which may also infect wildlife. In the UK, the badger (*Meles meles*) is considered to be the only wildlife reservoir of *M. bovis*. Infected badgers may develop clinical disease and pose a risk to cattle.

Badgers are a common, protected species, of ecological and cultural significance. Wildlife groups have generally opposed farming groups in debate over the English government's bTB policy which focuses upon badger culling.

Public attitudes towards badgers in the UK

Badgers are one of Britain's most ancient mammals with fossils dating back to the Middle Paleolithic age (250,000 years ago). The species is mentioned in the Domesday Book and features in many old British place names. Badgers are a part in British folklore and feature as popular characters in modern literature such as Kenneth Graham's *The Wind in the Willows* and Colin Dunn's *The Animals of Farthing Wood*. Badger persecution (digging, baiting, hunting) occurred in Britain for hundreds of years until the Badger Act in 1973 outlawed such activities.

Public familiarity with this distinctive species results in strong, largely positive, attitudes towards badgers. Only 4% of respondents in a 2006 Defra consultation supported a cull of badgers as part of bTB control in cattle. Whilst other polls have found a degree public acceptance that the management badger population might be necessary to control bTB in cattle, this is tempered by a preference that such should be without killing, and a degree of willingness to pay for such killing to be avoided.



Wildlife groups

There is a diverse spectrum of non governmental wildlife groups and charities representing badger interests. These groups range from moderate environmental associations to militant animal rights groups. Members of these organisations represent all walks of life and political persuasions. Although their backgrounds are very variable, many within these groups have unique knowledge of local badger populations, an excellent understanding badger ecology, and include professional skills in scientific and veterinary fields. Most groups provide indirect support for badgers through environmental protection, reducing impacts of roads and buildings, prevention of badger persecution, and public education.

Examples of wildlife groups with a badger interest include:

The *Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts* (The *Wildlife Trusts*) operates as an umbrella body for the 47 individual *Wildlife Trusts* covering the UK. As well as managing 2,300 nature reserves and marine conservation projects *The Wildlife Trusts* campaigns more widely for the protection of UK wildlife.



The *Badger Trust*, an umbrella group for approximately 60 UK wide regional groups, represents over 1,000 members, concerned specifically with badger protection.



Rehabilitated badger cubs prior to release

Wildlife rescue centres provide primary care for badgers. There are approximately 80 centres in the UK, the majority dealing mostly with adult badger casualties, with a smaller number, such as *Secret World Wildlife Rescue*, providing specialist care for badger cubs. These centres are mostly charities relying on public donations.

Team Badger is a coalition of 32 wildlife and welfare organisations formed specifically to fight the badger cull as a method of controlling bTB in cattle. The group includes large organizations such as *Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)*, *League Against Cruel Sports*, *Animal Aid*, *International Fund for Animal Welfare*, and *Care for the Wild*. It also notably includes Brian May's wildlife charity *Save me*.



Orphan badger cub with femoral fracture repair



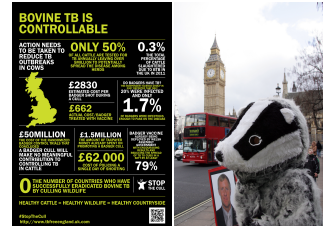
Current involvement of wildlife groups in bTB control

Opposition to badger culling

Many of the wildlife groups have been actively involved in protests over the government's badger culls started in England in 2013. Various marches, petitions and protests have taken place around the country, often focusing on the pilot cull areas in Somerset and Gloucester. The presence of protestors, both local residents and members of wildlife groups, in the pilot cull areas during shooting in 2013 undoubtedly contributed to considerable policing costs.

Badger vaccination

Several wildlife groups have established badger BCG vaccination programs, although these lack central co-ordination. Individuals have to attend the four-day accredited course run by AHVLA in order to cage trap and vaccinate badgers in the field. Despite the costs of this course (£750 per person) and subsequent annual fees (£350/750), training courses are booked up well in advance and to date 182 lay vaccinators have been trained. Defra offer grants of 50% towards course fees and certification for voluntary and community sector organizations. Although government and commercial companies are heavily represented in the list of Register of Certified Lay Vaccinators there is also significant representation from wildlife groups.



Badger groups campaigning against the badger cull

The *Wildlife Trusts* have vaccination programs in 12 areas of England with their *South and West Wales Wildlife Trust* are working with the Welsh Assembly Government to vaccinate badgers in Pembrokeshire. Badger rescue and protection groups are also actively involved in vaccination through organisations such as the *Badger Trust*, *Badger and cattle vaccination initiative*, and *Badger Protection League*. Most of these groups charge nominal fees for badger vaccination with manpower being provided gratis and equipment costs being met through public donations.



Badger being marked post BCG vaccination in Somerset

Utilisation of wildlife groups in bTB control

The wildlife groups have the skills, enthusiasm and manpower to contribute constructively to bTB control in badgers, and potential to generate financial support from the general public. This is best illustrated by the direct contribution to vaccinate programmes. Indirect contributions could come through the use of local knowledge on badger populations and ecology in order to target trapping for vaccination and providing farmer advice on appropriate biosecurity. The Welsh government estimates that 70% of vaccine costs (estimated £662 per badger) relate to labour in terms of preparing, setting and baiting traps prior to vaccination which could be reduced with the cooperation of wildlife groups.

The charity *Care for the Wild* estimates that the total cost of the 2013 badger pilot culls was £7.3m (£4,121 for each of the 1,771 badgers killed) of these costs £2.6m was spent policing the pilot cull areas. Whilst it would be extremely difficult to positively engage some of those individuals protesting against the cull, it would seem financially prudent to encourage as many individuals as possible to contribute positively to alternative methods of reducing disease transmission risks between badgers and cattle.

The Welsh government has certainly been aware of the potential benefits of working with wildlife groups in the badger vaccine programme in their Intensive Action Area and has attempted to engage with wildlife groups, albeit with limited success. Reasons for the reluctance of wildlife groups to become involved include: a suspicion of government, fear of badger culling subsequently taking place in areas of cooperation, concerns re funding, competition between groups for funding and publicity and lack of co-ordination between groups.



Badger being released post BCG vaccination in Somerset. This group charges landowners the cost of the vaccine (around £15), other costs are covered by donations.

Conclusions

Government, farmers and wildlife group members share the common goal of eradicating bTB from both cattle and badgers, but they differ in their attitudes as to how this can be achieved. Establishing common ground and mutual trust would fully utilise all available skills and manpower and expedite disease control and eventual eradication.

References: Available on request.

Note: The views expressed in this poster are those of the author alone, based upon two decades of working as a veterinary surgeon involved in wildlife rehabilitation. These views do not necessarily reflect those of the organisations mentioned in this poster or of other associations with which she is associated.