

Animal Rights: The Collapse of England's Badger Culls

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Region: [Europe](#)

Global Research, December 20, 2013

[The Ecologist](#)

These pilots are not on our land, but the ways the culls are being carried out is increasingly worrying and we are now concerned for the credibility and usefulness of the exercise. This sense of shifting scientific sands is a real issue for us, particularly if faced with any future proposition for wider culling.” Patrick Begg, National Trust rural enterprise director.

The beach-loads of sand that the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) and Natural England have shifted in pursuit of killing badgers over the last year or two (and in the case of the National Farmers Union (NFU), for many more years than two) have little to do with science. And the UK Environment Secretary Owen Paterson's bucket and spade are bigger than most. In the Westminster Hall [debate](#) on the pilot badger culls on 10 December MP Chris Williamson called him 'gung-ho' in his desire to pursue the cull route. A polite way to describe his statements on the cull would be "giving a positive spin". Perhaps "propaganda" would be more accurate. However you name it, his "science-based" utterances appear to come from an alternative Paterson universe where facts are simply what you decide them to be.

In his [statement](#) to Parliament on 23 October 2012 (announcing that the badger cull would be postponed to 2013, due to a little local difficulty with estimated badger numbers, although bad weather and the Olympics were also to blame), Paterson said "Last year TB led to the slaughter of 26,000 cattle in England at a cost of nearly £100 million". According to Defra's bovine TB statistics, the *total* number of cattle slaughtered in England in 2011 came to 22, 589. But what's an extra 3000 or more when you're trying to sell an unpopular and unjustified cull to MPs?

And the £100m? Again, the Defra figures state that bTB has cost £500m over the last 10 years, or roughly £50m per year. Defra also states that this figure is 'estimated' to rise to £1billion over the next decade if nothing is done. However, no figures are provided by Defra for justifying the doubling of the costs, and it makes no sense when one looks at their statistics for the incidence of bTB over the last 6 years. The number of cattle slaughtered because of TB since 2008 has dropped from 39,677 in 2008 to a projected 33,000 in 2013. In the West, which is the TB hotspot, the number of slaughtered cattle dropped from 21,585 in 2008 down to a projected 18,436 in 2013. Is it possible that the awful, out of control epidemic of bTB is a fantasy?

I am not suggesting that TB in cattle isn't a very real and distressing problem for those farmers with cattle, but I would like to put Defra's £50m per year into perspective. Dairy cattle in particular, because of modern farming practices, have for years suffered from chronic lameness, mastitis and fertility problems, all inter-related and all of which can lead

to unnecessary and early slaughter of valuable animals. In 1983 (that is 30 years ago), lameness alone cost the taxpayer £35 million. What would that cost now?

It is worth remembering that two days after Paterson's statement postponing the cull, a 7-hour-long and very heated debate about the cull resulted in MPs [voting](#) to abandon plans to shoot badgers by 147 votes to 28. But then, what does majority opinion matter to our Environment Secretary? Not that he was there for much of the debate having apparently [walked out](#) muttering "I can't stand any more of this!" Nor – and this is quite outrageous – has this vote any power to prevent the government (aka Paterson, Defra and the NFU) from slaughtering badgers.

A bare two weeks after the Somerset pilot cull finally started (27 August 2013), Paterson's department Defra was insisting that a badger found by a wounded badger patrol couldn't have been shot by the official marksmen because "All badgers killed as part of the pilot culls have been shot cleanly and killed instantly." How did they know? Because, as a Freedom of Information request put in by Care for the Wild [revealed](#) – and I do hope you are sitting down – the two (yes, *two*) independent monitors (presumably one overseeing the West Somerset cull and the second the West Gloucestershire cull) of the planned killing of up to 5000 badgers would be doing their monitoring by phoning the guns! "How's it going?" "Fine! Some of them squeal a bit but, hey...."

Come the official end of the Somerset cull, the failure to achieve the numbers demanded by the government's own criteria for the cull, and Paterson's infamous remark that it was "the badgers that moved the goalposts", he topped it two days later with a [rant](#) about the appalling, disgusting anti-cull protesters who were condemning badgers to a horrible death because their cosy pictures of black and white animals don't relate to "these miserable, emaciated sick animals spewing out disease". But Paterson's remarks don't "relate" to the truth. As Chris Williamson pointed out in the Westminster Hall debate:

"According to Farming Monthly International, "Out of nearly 1200 badgers caught in Wales for vaccination, none showed any signs of illness." That is revealing, given that the Secretary of State said that badgers are "spewing out disease". When he was probed on that claim, it turned out to be anecdotal hearsay from the National Farmers Union, which represents only 18% of farmers, and the people who were employed to do the culling. There is no evidence for his claim."

Further, there was, and presumably is, no proof that any of the culled badgers from the 'bTB hotspot areas' were infected because they were not being tested for it.

Following the end of the extended West Somerset cull when the guns still hadn't achieved the required 70% target, Paterson expressed "[great confidence](#) that Somerset's controversial badger cull will eradicate bovine tuberculosis from the area." This despite everyone, or at least those who still believe that killing 70% of the badgers would reduce (*reduce*, not eradicate, Mr Paterson) bovine TB in cattle, saying the culls will probably make matters worse.

On 29 November Natural England announced it was revoking the extended licence it had granted to the West Gloucestershire pilot badger cull, and the cull would end 3 weeks early.

The guns were simply not killing enough badgers – in fact on some nights no badgers were seen or killed. The original minimum number of kills for Gloucester was 2856, an estimated

70% of the total badger population in that area. After the failure of both pilot culls to kill anything near the original target figures the figures were swiftly revised downwards. Gloucester's target became 1650 but the six week cull had only achieved 30% of that total – hence the extension. Desperate times call for measures of desperation, so the target was now not 70% but 58%. And they couldn't even achieve that.

Natural England's initial statement said that the decision was “based on the decreasing number of badgers seen by contractors over recent weeks which makes achieving a further significant reduction in the coming weeks unlikely. Following discussions with the NFU, the cull company and Natural England, the licence for the extension of this year's pilot cull will stop with effect from noon on Saturday.” The full statement they issued later said that they had chosen to end it on the Saturday to coincide with the end of the open season for trapping badgers.

Owen Paterson's written [statement](#) to Parliament on the following Monday (he has been somewhat physically absent from the House since the “goalpost” fiasco) claimed that the ending of the Gloucestershire cull was purely so it would coincide with the ending of the trapping season. The numbers were absolutely fine. “The decision to extend has been shown to be the right one, with significant numbers of badgers removed.... The extension in Gloucestershire has therefore been successful in meeting its aim in preparing the ground for a fully effective four year cull.” He also made it clear that by the time the public and Parliament see the report from the panel of experts, he will already have made his decision on the roll-out of further culls:

“The Independent Panel of Experts will now consider the information collected during the pilots on the safety, effectiveness and humaneness of controlled shooting. This will inform my decision on the wider roll-out of badger control in those parts of England most severely affected by this disease. The Independent Panel of Experts report will be made available to Parliament and the general public at that time.”

The Westminster Hall debate produced two clear demands from MPs: that the government should not proceed any further with badgers culls without a full debate and vote by MPs – to do otherwise would be undemocratic; and that the independent panel evaluating the effects of the pilot badger culls should be augmented by the presence of more scientists and wildlife experts in order to produce a balanced and properly informed report. There is now an obvious distrust of the “facts and figures” MPs are being presented with.

The Farming Minister George Eustice stood in for Paterson at the Westminster Hall debate. In his closing statement he claimed that the “randomised badger cull” (the Krebs study) contributed to a *significant* reduction in disease (he failed to mention the rise in bTB cases outside the cull areas because of perturbation) – such significance having already been correctly described by another MP as ‘miniscule’. But such is the way the pro-cull ministers overstate their case and twist science and fact. As MP Tracy Crouch pointed out, “It is a bit of a cheek for the Government to say that the pilot culls have been a success, when those of us who are anti-cull have been told not to leap to conclusions until the independent panel has concluded.” For this was precisely the message I got from my MP when I wrote about the misuse of science to justify the culls:

“I think we need to wait for the full evaluation of the Somerset and Gloucestershire trials before coming to a conclusion about what has worked, and what has not worked. When we have the results of that evaluation, we shall be able to learn the lessons and take

appropriate action for the future.”

The fact that the culls were based on a *lack* of science escaped him.

But how can these culls be honestly evaluated, when so little evidence will be presented to the independent panel? Only around 150 badger carcasses will be subject to autopsy and that solely to establish if the badgers have been killed with one clean shot. Those bodies will have been selected by the marksmen who will not be exactly impartial in their selection. Any other evidence verbal or written will mostly come from the guns, and any “reduction” (or indeed increase) in disease will not be apparent for some time, and certainly not until well after Paterson has taken his decision to roll out more culls. And you can rest assured that he will not mention the slow but steady decrease in the incidence of TB outbreaks, or the reasons why that should be so.

What is clear from Paterson’s statement at the beginning of December, he has every intention of continuing with the badger culls. His ‘science’ dictates it. And just to prove how good that is, here’s an example:

In his October 2012 statement he claimed that: “... because our cattle system has cattle out on the fields, and 1 ml of badger urine yields 300,000 colony-forming units of disease and it takes only 0.001% to infect an animal.” Now, this looks as if he is trying to convince Parliament that one small pee in the grass from a badger can infect 300,000 cattle. But...

Has he (and I, and you) not realised that each cow produces up to 60 litres per day of slurry (which could be infected with TB) and that farmers spread millions of gallons of slurry all over their fields as fertiliser? Or is that too down to earth to be “science”?

First published by [The Ecologist](#)

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