

The English Badger Culls: the National Farmers Union's Successful Failure

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The UK government's highly unpopular 'pilot' badger culls have just come to the end of the second year of a four-year programme. Even without the independent oversight, monitoring and auditing by an Independent Expert Panel (IEP), discarded by the government after last year's slating by the IEP, the culling has been as much of a failure as last year, despite the National Farmers Union (NFU) hailing it as a 'success'.

But the NFU has been steering this policy of slaughtering our badgers for years. Ever since the first bovine TB-infected badger was found in 1971, to the [surprise](#) of animal scientists, farmers who dislike the controls and testing of cattle that can reduce the incidence of bTB have had something other than farming practices to blame.

Strict testing and bio-security controls had almost eradicated bTB by the late 1960s, and complacency set in. The very actions that had brought the disease under control were dropped. Once badgers came into the picture farmers started to cull them. To their annoyance in 1973 the badger was given some, but not enough, protected status. Even so, in 1975 '[strategic culling operations](#)' were being carried out by gassing. This was banned in 1980 but the killing went on. Unfortunately, so did the rise in TB.

The NFU, for commercial reasons, doesn't like vaccination as a method of tackling serious disease in farm animals. It [blocked](#) the vaccination against foot and mouth disease in the disastrous 2001 outbreak. MP Eric Martlew, speaking in the [parliamentary debate](#) on FMD in April 2001, said "I believe that no matter what the Government say, they will not persuade the NFU to accept vaccination."

Big farmers can't successfully export vaccinated cattle. It would have cost them over £250 million a year in lost trade. But as a result of their veto millions of animals were slaughtered; farmers lost their herds, their livelihoods and their lives through suicide. It cost the country billions. Even worse, TB testing was dropped during the outbreak and afterwards farms were restocked with untested cattle. The incidence of bovine TB rocketed. Would that have happened if the NFU had allowed vaccination?

And of course, they blamed the badgers and the NFU lobbied for a cull.

In 2005 the Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) produced a [consultation report](#) on badger culling. In its introductory paragraph it says:

"The Government has decided further measures should be implemented now to reduce cattle to cattle spread. But international experience indicates it is not possible to contain and eradicate bovine TB if its background presence in wildlife is left unaddressed."

Both Defra and the NFU have been selling the 'international' line unremittingly. Killing wildlife comes before any other option. The RSPCA [picked](#) the whole of Defra's report to pieces:

"The RSPCA is... concerned that there is a lack of balance in the document. Shortly after its publication the Independent Scientific Group (ISG) stated in an open letter to stakeholders that the paper was inaccurate in important aspects. The advice of the Science Advisory Council (SAC) – set up by Defra to provide expert, independent and published advice on science policy and strategy – is ignored. Additionally, very selective and misleading use is made of scientific material. The end result is one that appears to be designed to advance a cause rather than a balanced document and... calls into question Defra's commitment to evidence-based policy making."

In addition, why had Defra chosen to 'consult' with so few bodies (with some emphasis on agri-business) while ignoring major environmental and wildlife organisations like itself? For each of the questions posed by Defra, the RSPCA has negative responses. And then the NFU raises its head again:

"The RSPCA is concerned... that a decision about a badger killing policy may be introduced because of "the need to win co-operation with farmers on introducing movement testing and compensation, and the wider objective of industry, over time, bearing a progressively greater share of the costs of bTB controls." This could imply that badger killing might be introduced as a sort of quid pro quo in relation to the farming industry rather than on grounds of the wider issues of sustainability and scientific evidence. This concern is reinforced by the policy decision by the NFU not to co-operate with Defra on pre-movement testing until the government announces a cull of badgers and the recent Defra announcement to delay the introduction of such testing."(my emphasis)

Reporting to the Parliamentary Committee for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Professor John Bourne, head of the ISG, said:

"You ask how the scientific information has been handled by the media and by Defra and I'm bound to say I don't think it's been handled terribly well...I was obliged to write to Ministers complaining that the scientific information presented in the exercise was inaccurate and also stating that two of their proposed culling proposals would in fact make the situation worse. I'm sad to say, yes, I don't think they [Defra] have done a very good job of it and one of our comments in the final report is that Defra do seem to be unable to handle scientific data and translate that in to policy... it would be really helpful if Defra embraced the science and stimulated discussions with the NFU based on the science to develop science-based policies".

The NFU did not get its badger cull. In 2008 the Environment Minister Hilary Benn [told Parliament](#):

"Having listened carefully to a wide range of views from scientists, farming, veterinary and wildlife organisations, and many others, and having considered all the evidence, I have decided that while such a cull might work, it might also not work. It could end up making the disease worse if it was not sustained over

time or delivered effectively, and public opposition, including the unwillingness of some landowners to take part, would render this more difficult.

“I do not think it would be right to take this risk. Therefore – and in line with the advice I have received from the Independent Scientific Group – our policy will be not to issue any licences to farmers to cull badgers for TB control, although we remain open to the possibility of revisiting this policy under exceptional circumstances, or if new scientific evidence were to become available.”

Instead, the government put in place 6 badger vaccination schemes along with pre-movement testing and cattle control regimes. But the NFU didn't give up. They [threatened](#) a judicial review and other legal actions over Benn's ban on badger culling saying, “we remain committed to supporting a challenge to what we believe is an unlawful restriction on producers' ability to take action to prevent the spread of TB on their farms.”

I like the word 'producers'. This is about big business, not small struggling farms. And note, they also, in partnership with the pro-hunting group Countryside Alliance, [made a deal](#) with the Tories: give us the badger cull and we will give you the rural vote in the 2010 general election.

In 2009 Wales took the decision not to cull its badgers but instead to put in place annual testing for cattle and strict bio-security and movement controls – with the result that they have cut their incidence of bTB by 50%, something the Welsh branch of the NFU [tries to deny](#).

Following the election in 2010 almost the first thing the Tory-led coalition government did was to [cancel](#) 5 of the 6 areas for badger vaccination trials and start planning to kill badgers, despite the lack of any new scientific evidence that culling was the answer. The guns would have preferred to get out and start shooting straight away, but culls take time to organise, particularly if the public are going to object. Defra and Natural England, which would be issuing the licences, had to tread with care.

While Defra did its best to make the whole exercise look scientific, with monitoring and setting up the Independent Expert Panel to audit the results, the NFU set up a culling company for each area where the killing would take place. There was much talk of 'good marksmen' etc. Unfortunately, men with guns do not necessarily equate with fieldcraft and accurate knowledge of badger numbers.

Culling was supposed to start in 2012 but had to be postponed. [There were too many badgers](#), too much rain, not enough policemen and farmers couldn't be confident of being ready in time. There were more arguments over badger numbers the following year, ending up with the culling period being extended because the guns couldn't kill enough, prompting the now-famous quote from the Environment Secretary Owen Paterson; “[the badgers have moved the goalposts](#).”

And all this while, the NFU, aided by Paterson, kept repeating that all badgers in TB 'hot spots' had TB, all TB in cattle was down to badgers, and that the only way to halt TB in cattle was to kill the badgers. Oh yes, and bovine TB is the greatest threat to farming, out of control and getting worse each year, this despite Defra figures showing that, little by little, TB was decreasing. It was really not the problem it was hyped up to be.

It was not surprising that, with no other advice from the NFU and Defra, most farmers were persuaded to support the culling and hate the people protesting against it. And while it truly is devastating for a farmer to see his herd succumb to TB, the NFU never mentions the larger-by-far number of cattle [slaughtered](#) because of lameness or mastitis. And Defra has stopped recording those figures. Do they not want to tackle the issue of poor husbandry?

When the culls finally started in 2013, the then NFU President Peter Kendal said:

“I am confident however that through the combined efforts of farmers, the NFU and government over the last year to illustrate the impact TB has on farms, and the scientific basis for badger control, more people than ever recognise the need to address the disease in badgers.”

But the public weren't swayed by the 'scientific basis' then, and even less so now. Almost 90% of people [are against](#) any more culling. And they were right. Last year's culls failed on numbers and humaneness and also, I think, on [safety](#). So what does Defra do? It lowers the number of badgers to be killed this year but gives huge margins, between 316 and 1,776 for Somerset, and between 391 to 1,292 for Gloucester, figures that were dismissed as 'rubbish' by many experts. To be on the safe side Somerset's target was 316 and Gloucester's 615. And just to be sure of 'success' it gets rid of any independent oversight and auditing.

It didn't work. On the day the culls ended up pops Andrew Guest of the NFU with this [statement](#):

“I think generally we are pretty pleased with how it has gone. In large parts of the area we are seeing very few badgers left on the ground now. Unfortunately there are one or two areas where we haven't been able to be as effective as we'd like to because of the actions of protesters but largely we are very happy with it.”

In Devon, Dorset and Cornwall they had been busy [planning for badger culling](#) next year. The NFU wants to make the culling areas bigger so that there aren't enough anti-cull people to get in the way. Everyone was gung-ho for more killing.

Unfortunately, the *Guardian* [published figures](#) leaked to [Team Badger](#) by someone working for Natural England – in Somerset they managed to kill 315 badgers and in Gloucester the total killed was 253. Defra has neither confirmed nor denied the leaked figures. Unlike last year, no extension has been allowed 'for political reasons'.

The word is that, with two failures in two years, the culls will not be rolled out to other areas; and the current Environment Secretary Liz Truss, who has been very silent about the culls, has reportedly been told to abandon the culls until after next year's election. The Labour Party has already committed to scrapping the culls if it comes into power. Politicians have to take account of the fact that the hated badger cull is among the [top 5 issues](#) that constituents contact their MPs about.

That all went well then. The NFU blamed the protestors. Some of the guns had blamed really good weather with bright moonlit nights when they couldn't use their infra-red sights. I'm surprised they didn't blame the badgers. It really is time someone put the NFU out to

grass. Both farmers and wildlife deserve better.

And if you haven't quite got the message - Defra has its headquarters in Smith Square, London. The NFU's London headquarters are in... Smith Square, London.

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