

October 29, 2018

Animal welfare impacts of badger culling

Dear editor

We are writing to express our extreme concern following the recent media coverage^{1,2} relating to the methodology being used by contractors to kill badgers under licence, as part of the Government's policy to control bovine TB in cattle.

The coverage relates to the shooting of badgers that have been captured in live traps. Covert video footage from Cumbria appears to show a trapped badger being shot with a firearm at close range, following which it appears to take close to a minute to stop moving. The contractor clearly observes the animal during this time, but makes no attempt to expedite the death of the badger and prevent further suffering, as required by the current *Natural England Best Practice Guide*, which states: "Immediately after shooting, the animal should be checked to ensure it is dead, and if there is any doubt, a second shot must be taken as soon as possible."³

The conversation between the contractor and his companion also suggests they did not intend to bag the badger at the site of the shooting, again, in our view, breaching the best practice guide.

While the footage only relates to the experience of a single badger, and while the degree to which the badger was conscious in the period immediately following the shot is unclear, we can by no means be certain the badger did not suffer. It also raises serious questions about the training, competence and behaviour of contractors in relation to both badger welfare and biosecurity. This adds to existing concerns relating to the humaneness of "controlled shooting" (targeting free-roaming badgers with rifles), which continues to be a permitted method under culling licences, in spite of the reservations expressed by both the Government's own Independent Expert Panel in its 2014 report⁴, and the BVA itself, which concluded, in 2015, that it "can no longer support the continued use of controlled shooting as part of the badger control policy"⁵, yet has since continued to support the issuing of licences that permit the method.

The BVA has consistently indicated its support for what it calls the "tried and tested" method of trapping and shooting, but has thus far failed to provide comprehensive and robust evidence for its humaneness.

During 2017, almost 20,000 badgers were killed under licence across 19 cull zones – around 60 per cent of which were killed by controlled shooting. The remainder were trapped and shot⁶. Natural England reported its monitors observed just 74 (slightly more than 0.6 per cent) of the controlled shooting events for accuracy and humaneness. No information has been provided on the extent to which trapping and shooting activities were monitored. This raises serious concerns about the extent of suffering that might be experienced by very large numbers of animals, for which contractors are not being held to account.

If contractors reach the maximum culling targets set by Natural England for 2018, as many as 41,000 additional badgers could be killed⁷. The extent to which these animals will suffer is once again being left in the hands of contractors, with woefully inadequate oversight, and in the face of anecdotal evidence of breaches of best practice guidance. This situation is clearly unacceptable from an animal welfare perspective and it is our view that by endorsing the policy, the BVA is contradicting the principles contained within its own Animal Welfare Strategy⁸.

We therefore urge the BVA to withdraw its support for any further licensed badger culling, and the RCVS to make it clear that any veterinarian who provides support for culling activities that result in unnecessary and avoidable animal suffering could face disciplinary proceedings. In our view, the veterinary profession has no business supporting this licensed mass killing with all its inherent negative welfare and biosecurity implications, and for which the disease control benefits are, at best, extremely uncertain.

We believe the continued support for the culls by veterinary bodies in the face of poor evidence for its efficacy damages the credibility of the profession, and that same support in the face of potential animal suffering on a large scale undermines its reputation.

We stand ready to discuss these issues in more detail.

Yours faithfully,
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BVA's reply to letter

Dear editor,

The BVA supports a comprehensive approach to tackling bTB that should include control measures in cattle alongside simultaneous and coordinated measures in badgers, other wildlife and susceptible farmed species.

Our policy on bTB control was developed through our committee structures with input from members, and was signed off by the BVA's council. We are clear that bTB control and eradication must be based on the application of sound scientific research and veterinary epidemiology, and that the methods used in badger cull areas must be humane.

We have not shied away from challenging practice in the past, as evidenced by our withdrawal of support for the controlled shooting method on welfare grounds. More recently, we wrote to Natural England to express concerns for the welfare of badgers trapped in cages for long periods during the summer heatwave.

It would not be appropriate to comment in detail on the recent badger cull video, as the footage is grainy, and it is a matter for Natural England to investigate any concerns.

Finally, the suggestion in this letter the RCVS should enact disciplinary proceedings on any veterinary surgeon supporting culling activities could set a dangerous precedent and is particularly unwarranted at a time when veterinary bodies are prioritising support and employee well-being across the profession.

We have met with Born Free Foundation on this issue in the past and would be happy to do so again. This is a clearly an emotive and difficult issue, but we believe it is essential to use all the tools in the tool box to curb the spread of this devastating disease.

Yours faithfully,
JOHN FISHWICK, MA, VetMB, DCHP, DipECBHM, MRCVS, **BVA senior vice-president.**

Defra's reply to letter

Dear editor,

Bovine TB is a slow moving, insidious disease and, while badger culls are a necessary part of the strategy

to eradicate this disease, no one wants to be culling badgers forever.

All contractors involved in culling activities receive thorough training on effective, safe and humane badger control, and follow Natural England's best practice guidelines.

Natural England has considered the video footage and is satisfied the badger was dispatched in compliance with licence conditions and the best practice guides.

Yours faithfully,
GOVERNMENT SPOKESMAN.

Fertility tests in rams will feature in part 2

Dear editor,

Regarding GJ Ramsey Hovell's letter (1 October issue) about my article ("Preparing rams for mating season"; 10 September issue), I wholeheartedly agree with him that a fertility examination of rams, including manual palpation of the reproductive tract and semen collection, is an essential part of ram preparation for the breeding season.

Therefore, I have dedicated the whole of part 2 of my article to it, which is hopefully going to be published imminently.

Yours faithfully,

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Testing ram fertility should also be routine

Dear editor,

The article "Preparing rams for mating season" (10 September issue) omitted a salient aspect, considering examples are given relating to numbers of ewes to be served, longevity and estimated lambing percentage. Examination of rams for fertility should also be a routine commitment – especially at the beginning of their breeding season, as well as in later stages. Clinical examination of genitalia is a straightforward procedure, holding the ram in a sitting position, with semen assessment added when considered necessary. It is important that infections or scarring from injuries are identified before rams join the ewes and that abnormalities – such as testicular hypoplasia and spermatozoa – are diagnosed as early as possible, which, in the latter case, may not be until a second breeding season. To ensure rams are prepared as fully as possible for a successful breeding, season examinations for fertility should be carried out routinely along with body scoring and attention to feet, as recommended already.

Yours faithfully,
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ISSN 1352-9374

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Designed and produced by Veterinary Business Development Ltd. Printed in Great Britain by Pensord, Blackwood, Gwent.

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Average net circulation Jan-Dec 2017 19,104

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