



Badgers must be controlled

June 2005

VAWM welcomes the recent statement by the President of the British Veterinary Association and former Chief Veterinary Officer for N.Ireland, Dr. Bob McCracken. Speaking in April at the Association's annual dinner in Cardiff he said that "The infected badger must be controlled and removed - we are no longer debating if the infected badger should be removed; what we are debating is how to do so in an effective manner"

Bovine TB was first discovered in badgers in 1971 and all the scientific evidence since then including the field trials at Thornbury, Steeple Leaze, the Hartland peninsula, East Offaly and, most recently, the Irish Four Counties Trials have identified the badger as the major wildlife reservoir for bovine TB in cattle.

Latest figures available from DEFRA show that a large proportion of badgers, up to 50% in some areas of the Southwest, W. Midlands and Sussex are infected with bovine TB. Many of these animals will have been excreting vast numbers of infectious tubercle bacilli into the agricultural environment.

Tuberculous badgers die after a chronic illness and all badgers experience other adverse effects of overpopulation; namely loss of territory, fighting, wounding, increased risk of road accidents, lack of food and starvation.

Failure to control TB in badgers has inevitably resulted in spill over into other wildlife, including five species of wild deer. The growing reservoir of infection in badgers and other wildlife constitutes a major hazard for man and for many wild and domestic animals

But TB apart, the badger, a species without natural predators and protected by law since 1973, is now a serious agricultural pest in many parts of the country, a) from the damage that it does by digging, b) from its predation on ground nesting birds, hedgehogs, new born lambs and free range piglets and c) as the reservoir of a serious zoonotic disease. The population has probably increased 10-20 fold in the last decade. It is a classic example of a population out of control through lack of management. The badger is not an endangered species and no longer merits its protected status.

Non lethal methods of population control such as contraception, as yet only a research possibility, are not the answer. And they will do nothing to combat the problem of endemic TB in badgers, for which vaccination strategies are only a distant possibility.

Strategic culling in areas of endemic infection is essential for controlling TB in badgers. But nationwide the population also needs to be brought under control by measured culling. The emotive support for the badger is unbalanced and should not continue to undermine proper veterinary concern for the health and welfare of badgers, cattle and other wild and domestic animal species.

In February this year VAWM fully supported the letter sent to the Secretary of State for the Environment, signed by some 350 members of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, expressing no confidence in DEFRA's current handling of the situation. This month Dr. John Gallagher, senior author of the letter, has told the Secretary of State "It is self evident you are being badly advised".

For more information, including the full text of the letter to the Secretary of State, see:

www.vet-wildlifemanagement.org.uk

Or telephone: 01489 890919 or 01635 248410