

A recent meeting with CEO of Scottish Badgers Eddie Palmer and his partner Ellie Stirling revealed their dedication towards a creature which is being victimised.

When they first began watching these fascinating mammals in 1986, they were appalled to learn that the badger was still being brutally persecuted in many areas by badger baiters, and disturbed by other human activities.

'At least 75% of sett disturbance is a result of forestry, farming and

development,' Eddie says, 'and despite it being against the law to do anything within 30 metres of a sett, it remains a major problem. Something as simple as a new extension being built can be devastating to a group of badgers.

'Our wildlife needs safe corridors of suitable, unfragmented habitat so it can travel to feeding areas, but our roads cut across this, leading to casualties. Human activity is the cause of most of the problems affecting wildlife.'

Following a move to Angus in 1995, Eddie and Ellie set up the Tayside Badger Group to survey and record setts. In 1999, the Scottish Government called a meeting of the four badger groups in Scotland and suggested the need for a point of contact with one key



BADGERED TO DEATH

Polly Pullar is concerned that the demonisation of the badger could be catastrophic for this marvellous mustelid

organisation, for fear of a major disease outbreak in Scotland, such as rabies or foot and mouth.

In 2002, Scottish Badgers was founded. The charity aims to protect and monitor the Scottish population against the horrors that affect badgers, particularly in areas where baiting is a problem.

Since then, they have been providing an invaluable, free advisory service for the police and the general public. They

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Eager volunteers pay a fee for specialised training which allows them to monitor setts, valuable work they carry out for free. Scottish Badgers have a growing membership, demonstrating the love the British public have for this omnivorous mustelid, which has been around since the last ice age.

Yet, speak to almost any farmer in the country on the subject of the badger and you are liable to receive a tirade of



negativity.

The badger is currently being successfully demonised due to its link with bovine tuberculosis, and although we are fortunate to have no TB in the Scottish herd at the moment, we simply cannot afford to be complacent.

As farmers are squeezed financially and forced to keep higher numbers of cattle in order to survive, they cannot be blamed for believing what appears to be a UK Government-led campaign to load hatred onto the badger, which is becoming a political pawn.

Reading a review of England’s controversial badger cull by CEO of the Badger Trust, Dominic Dyer, left me feeling that we are witnessing one of the worst managed operations ever affecting a native British species. Ironically, it appears to be an attempt to wipe out a protected species in an era when we are investing vast sums to bring back others.

‘The badger cull is a politically motivated wildlife eradication policy and has no basis in science, is hugely cruel and is a massive waste of public money,’ says Dominic.

‘So far the government have spent over £50 million of public funds killing just under 35,000 badgers which equates to £1,100 per badger. None of the badgers killed have been tested for TB and the vast majority are likely to be completely free of the disease.’

Part of the cull saw over 20,000 badgers killed in 2017 over a six-week period by a controlled shooting method, which could result in animals taking over five minutes to die. It’s a method condemned by the British Veterinary Association as inhumane and ineffective.

However, TB outbreaks in Scotland could become a real possibility. When TB

Above: Male European badger standing on hind legs. **Above left:** Eddie Palmer, CEO, Scottish Badgers. **Left:** 20,000 badgers were recently killed using a controversial controlled shooting method.

was recently found in cattle on the Isle of Skye, there were numerous uninformed tweets blaming badgers again, even though there are none on the island.

‘We know from satellite collar research that badgers largely avoid cattle in both pasture areas and farmyards,’ says Dominic. ‘We have no evidence that they easily spread TB to cattle, but lots of evidence exists to show that cattle can infect badgers. The only long-term solution is by cattle-based measures.

‘We need to see more regular and improved testing regimes combined with tighter movement and biosecurity controls. The recent outbreak on the Isle of Skye was not down to badgers but due to infected cattle being transported.’

Incidents like the one on Skye highlight how easily we could find ourselves rife with TB in our cattle, and in a similarly gruesome scenario to England. It’s a terrifying thought that we could so swiftly eradicate the badger altogether; are we still so unenlightened?

‘In Scotland, we are TB-free as we have more rigorous biosecurity regarding cattle movements and a more stringent testing method,’ says Eddie,

who believes vaccination is the best way forward.

‘We have volunteers who would be willing to participate in a vaccination programme and it wouldn’t be necessary to vaccinate every single badger in order to succeed; it could easily be done.’

If TB sweeps into Scotland, then Eddie and his dedicated colleagues at Scottish Badgers will find themselves at the forefront of the issue. Badger Trust’s Dominic has a similarly strong case for vaccination. ‘It would cost the Wildlife Trusts and other volunteer badger vaccination groups only around £200 to trap and vaccinate a badger.

‘Whilst culling is complicated, controversial and costly, vaccination has public backing, is far cheaper and brings farmers and conservationists together in a spirit of mutual respect and trust. The cull is failing farmers, taxpayers and our wildlife. Even if every badger were to be wiped out, there would still be TB in the national herd.’

I leave you to make your own mind up about the wisdom of the badger cull, and the repercussions of a similar situation occurring in Scotland.

FIELD FACTS

EUROPEAN BADGER



HABITAT: Europe and West Asia

ORIGIN: Badgers are part of the Mustelidae family, which includes weasels and otters.

DESCRIPTION: Back, white, brown and grey with a small head, a stocky body, small black eyes and a short tail.

DIET: Omnivores, eating earthworms, insects, cereals, fruit and small mammals.

BEHAVIOUR: Badgers are sociable, forming groups of six adults on average. They form hierarchical social systems with large boars asserting dominance over smaller males.

For advice on badger-related issues contact: Emily Platt, species protection officer, Scottish Badgers.

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