

Conclusion

(paper supporting the blog TB, Badgers and Cattle in The UK: A Campaign Ripe For A Re-boot, at <http://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org>)

Chris Rose chris@campaignstrategy.co.uk @campaignstrat December 2020

Introduction

On the face of it, the muted response of most of England's conservation, animal welfare and environment groups to the government's latest cull of as many as 60,000 badgers remains a bit of a mystery. Particularly as it marked a u-turn on the policy of phasing out culling in favour of vaccination, announced just months earlier.

Badgers are the closest Britain comes to having living Teddy Bears: if groups like the RSPB, The Wildlife Trusts (symbol – the badger), National Trust, RSPCA and WWF were to mount a campaign to save badgers from unjustified slaughter, it could create an imperative that would be hard for politicians and businesses to resist. In a head-to-head with the public, pro-culling outriders such as the NFU and the Countryside Alliance would no doubt come off worse. Retailers like supermarkets and dairy companies would respond to their customers.

That the NGO response was so limited is partly because the 'badger-cattle-TB' debate has become technified and ossified, and the disputes almost ritualised. They are conducted amongst a small group of experts and lobbyists, many of them conversing in vet-speak: a classic esoteric issue.

Few outside that small circle are even aware of cattle TB basics such as the fact that it was spread around the country by re-stocking with contaminated cattle after the Foot and Mouth epidemic, that the standard UK cow TB test probably misses half the cases, that huge numbers of cattle get shuttled around the country all the time, that lots of experts have for decades called for biosecurity and cattle controls not culling, and that about 95% of cattle developing TB catch it from other cattle not badgers.

The prospect of simply having to get up to speed with 'TB' when there are so many bigger and easier things to engage with, has probably been enough in itself to deter NGOs from getting 'involved'.

Plus, the larger NGOs are not confident in their relationships with farming or landowners. Like many politicians, they are a bit awed by the NFU so they do not challenge its propaganda.

The short explanation of the badger-cattle-TB situation is that cattle controls were relaxed and TB grew, badgers were blamed and culled, government involved scientists who repeatedly found that culling is a really ineffective way to try and eliminate TB in cattle, and because the NFU et al don't like that, the government continues culling and cherry-picks the science to defend it, which only has to be a wafer-thin exercise, as the scrutiny is weak.

Industrial Agriculture

Serious agricultural intensification was just taking off in the 1970s when TB was found in badgers, and some government vets, Conservative politicians and farmers, started out on the anti-badger jihad. Chief badger champion Dominic Dyer of the Badger Trust has rightly described cattle TB as 'industrial pollution' and 'a disease of industrial farming' but those are not the terms in which campaign has been fought. Intensive farming such as dairy concentration, specialisation, larger herd sizes, slurry spreading, silage feeding and maize growing has also escaped scrutiny. Fed bucolic images of outdoor cows grazing flowery meadows in brand promotions and unable to distinguish a rye grass monoculture from an ancient hay meadow, the public is none the wiser.

As a result, the struggle over badgers and bovine TB in England has been going on almost 50 years but remains a stand-off involving attack and counter-attack, with no side showing signs of an outright win. The opposing forces are dug into trenches like the allied and German forces of WWI.

The current badger cull seems to have ended but the casualty figures may not be released for some time. No doubt the pro-badger forces, which in truth are a comparatively small band, will counter-attack in the fields, and in politics and the media. Yet so long as this issue remains polarised around vaccination versus culling of badgers, such a response is unlikely to be decisive. The 'pro badger' camp has understandably promoted badger vaccination as a 'solution' but without winning any serious government support in England.

Cullers see vaccination as a threat and the ensuing culling v. vaccination argument has enabled the government to deflect attention from changes in farming that might solve the problem before 'needing' to cull badgers. That framing plays to the advantage of the cull lobby, and the deadlock has continued. However, something big has now changed.

Changed Context

As in WWI when the deadlock on the Western Front was finally broken by the arrival of American reinforcements, the small regiment of pro-badger campaigners could soon be joined by the much heavier divisions with livestock farming in their sights, only for reasons totally unrelated to TB. If (and it is an 'if'), the friends of Brock co-operate with their potential new allies, it could create a breakthrough.

The government faces an imperative to down-size cattle farming including dairy, and to radically change land use. This is primarily to cut climate emissions, increase carbon storage, mitigate climate change impacts, and to the pleasure of the Treasury, cut subsidies. With the COP26 climate talks to be held in the UK in 2021, and the recent launch of a government plan to overhaul agriculture, many NGOs and politicians will be engaging on these topics. Swathes of business and industry which have made much greater progress in cutting their own emissions, will also be casting a critical eye over farming, which has made almost none.

On top of this, intensive farming and dairy in particular, is causing a very obvious environmental crisis of air and water pollution from slurry, silage spills, nitrates and soil loss, erosion and pollution, all leading to massive impacts on nature and health, and indeed

farming itself. Many aspects of intensive dairy – maize growing, rye grass silage, creation of vast amounts of slurry – are under-considered co-factors in spreading cattle TB.

That farming pollution could turn into a political ‘hot potato’ if that’s not too horticultural a metaphor, just as bees and neonics did. Like fracking, it also has the potential to cause particular concern in acutely affected areas, only this time, mainly in Conservative constituencies. But it needs some systematic and well-resourced campaigning to do so.

Lord Deben of the Committee on Climate Change has called for “revolutionary” change in farming and diet, which means reducing livestock and dairy farming down to a fraction of its current size. Former Defra Chief Scientist Ian Boyd has suggested halving the size of the livestock industry. If the badger-lobby and wider environmental advocates join forces around de-escalating and restricting intensive farming, they could make high TB areas and TB-friendly dairy farming some of the first to be converted to public interest land use.

All these are policy areas familiar to the mainstream conservation and environment movement, and central to making progress on rebuilding biodiversity and nature protection. Done right, they can also help deliver a win on badgers, which could help campaigns because the badger is well known, with an outsized cultural importance easily understood by those relatively uninformed about nature and environmental issues. So from a campaigning perspective, it does have potential for illustrating the benefits of a radical reform of agriculture.

At The Wildlife Trusts, Craig Bennett has called for 30% of England and Wales to be set aside for the recovery of nature. An interesting practical question is how that could be done in ways which also enable the English badger and cattle saga to come to an end.

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