

Press release 17th July 2024

**OXFORDSHIRE BADGER GROUP
CALLS ON OXFORD UNIVERSITY TO OWN YOUR FLAWED SCIENCE AND
SPEAK OUT AGAINST BADGER EXTERMINATION.**

Oxford University is the birthplace of the Badger Culls. Scientists from Oxford, with others designed, conducted and analysed the original Randomised Badger Control Trial¹ (RBCT). DEFRA uses their findings, which stated that badgers have a substantial role in spreading bovine TB (bTB) to justify killing badgers on an industrial scale. Since 2013, over 230,000 badgers have been slaughtered. Cull zones now cover much of the west and central England. Badger populations are close to local extinction in some areas. Over 60% of Oxfordshire is in a cull zone along with our neighbouring counties.

Oxfordshire Badger Group² has been pleading with Oxford scientists over the past year to add their influence to the badger cull debate. They have declined to have a meaningful dialogue. . We ask them to speak out against the misuse of their research. Keeping silent on one of the major animal welfare issues of the day is not scientifically principled. It allows DEFRA and Natural England to ignore new evidence and keep on culling regardless. Their silence is deadly for badgers, does not help farmers or cattle and is condemned by many members of the public. Our petition and open letter³ “Oxford University's Scientists Must Speak Out Against Badger Extermination” now has over 50,000 signatures.

Shamefully, the university scientists say they ‘*have no appetite*’ to revisit the RBCT in the light of new evidence. They refuse to engage in what they see as a political rather than a scientific debate. Yet this is a pivotal moment. DEFRA are considering moving to targeted culling⁴. The new Labour government manifesto states badger culling is ineffective’, yet is still considering allowing it to continue, even as scientific evidence against culling mounts.

DEFRA’s own scientists analysed the overall impact of implementing a range of bTB control measures. ⁵ They did not find clear evidence to link culling badgers to a reduction in bovine TB. Yet the paper by Birch et al was widely reported as showing that culling badgers had reduced the incidence of bTB by 56%. Did Oxford challenge this misinformation?

In April 2024, Natural England’s Director of Science advised against issuing supplementary cull (SBC) licences stating “*Over the past few years, the balance of evidence has shifted.... and “farmers can avoid the considerable expense and inconvenience of undertaking the SBC without increasing the risk of their cattle suffering from bTB”*”. Officials overruled this advice and badgers are now being killed over the summer (including we believe Oxfordshire Cull Zone 49 which already had completed 4 years of intensive culling).

Professor David MacDonald reviewed the evidence base for the current cull policy for the Badger Trust⁶ (November 2023). He concluded “*in 2023, much as in 2007, it is hard to see that killing badgers will make a meaningful contribution*”. Sadly, his fellow scientists have chosen not to support this initiative.

An important new paper⁷ “Absence of effects of widespread badger culling on tuberculosis in cattle” by Torgerson et al Scientific Reports 14, raises serious questions over the validity of the methods used to analyse the RBCT data. This study re-examined original RBCT data using a range of statistical models. It found that the RBCT analysis chose one of the very few models to show that culling had an effect on bTB herd incidence. It concludes that the RBCT is not reproducible and “there was insufficient evidence to conclude RBCT proactive badger culling affected bTB breakdown incidence”. In other words, the original Oxford study that underpins culling badgers is deeply flawed.

The RBCT was a politically charged, high profile research project that ran for 8 years and cost UK taxpayers ~£49 million. The only thing in science that is wrong is when you don’t admit that you have made bad choices. To do so shows that you are a good scientist.

We renew our call for Oxford Scientists to pursue scientific rigour in acknowledging the new science that has developed over the last two years that changes the narrative and join us in calling for an immediate end to the badger cull.

NOTES

Oxfordshire Badger Group will present the petition, with over 50,000 signatures to Oxford University School of Biology on the afternoon of Thursday 18th July

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REFERENCES

1. Donnelly, C. A. et al. Positive and negative effects of widespread badger culling on tuberculosis in cattle. *Nature* 439, 843–846 (2006)
2. Oxfordshire Badger Group (Registered Charity England & Wales no. 1186859) <https://www.oxonbadgergroup.org.uk/>
3. <https://www.change.org/p/oxford-university-s-scientists-must-speak-out-against-badger-extermination-3c2bc181-3849-4651-8d5c-97ec270a2111>
4. Bovine TB: Consultation on proposals to evolve badger control policy and introduce additional cattle measures DEFRA 14 March 2024 https://consult.defra.gov.uk/bovine-tb/bovine-tb-consultation-wildlife-cattle/supporting_documents/Bovine%20TB%20Consultation%20Document.pdf
5. *Birch et al., published in Nature, February 2024*)
6. A commentary on Current Policy. A preamble to the Badger Trust’s report ‘Tackling Bovine Tb together, David W Macdonald, Dept Biology, Oxford
7. Absence of effects of widespread badger culling on tuberculosis in cattle Paul R Torgerson, Sonja Hartnack, Philip Rasmussen, Fraser Lewis & Thomas E. S. Langton *Scientific Reports* 14 Article number: 16326 (2024) <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-024-67160-0>

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Eileen Anderson (Trustee) : It is horrible knowing that innocent badgers are being killed across Oxfordshire, in contradiction to the science and with so little concern for their lives or the survival of a native mammal.

Linda Ward (Trustee):

The scientists were reluctant to openly challenge the former Conservative governments pro-cull policy. But to continue to keep silent in the face of the emerging new evidence would be inexcusable and call their scientific integrity into question. In my view they need to either publicly defend their RBCT or accept that it's findings are flawed.

Julia Hammett (Chair and Trustee): Oxford University's research has enabled the cattle industry to kill 230,000 badgers. DEFRA is openly ignoring the scientific evidence that culling is not associated with a measurable reduction in bTB. The eminent scientists who led the RBCT must demand that the government returns to robust, evidence based policies.