

Open Letter to Department of Biology 18th July 2024

From the Trustees of Oxfordshire Badger Group

OXFORDSHIRE BADGER GROUP AND 50,000 PETITIONERS CALL ON OXFORD UNIVERSITY TO OWN YOUR FLAWED SCIENCE AND SPEAK OUT AGAINST BADGER EXTERMINATION.

We first presented our petition – then at over 13,000 signatures - to you in April of this year. Your silence on the badger cull remains deafening.

Our petition and open letter “Oxford University's Scientists Must Speak Out Against Badger Extermination” now has over 50,000 signatures¹. We present it today and ask you to respond to new scientific evidence that the badger cull is not effective in controlling bovine TB (bTB).

For you to remain 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. Your silence is deadly for badgers, does not help farmers or cattle and is publicly condemned. We urge you to revisit the RBCT² in the light of new evidence that the key finding – that badgers play a significant role in spreading the disease to cattle- is not reproduceable.

The scientific debate over the benefits / futility of the badger cull is at a pivotal moment. DEFRA are still considering moving to targeted culling³. The new Labour government manifesto stated that badger culling is ‘ineffective’, yet it may allow it to continue, even as the scientific evidence against culling mounts.

DEFRA’s own scientists analysed bTB control after years of intensive culling.⁴ They did not find clear evidence to link culling to a reduction in bovine TB. Yet this paper was widely reported as showing that culling badgers had reduced the incidence of bTB by 56%, when in fact all it shows the overall impact of implementing a range of bTB control measures.

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 are allowing badgers to be killed over the summer (including we believe Oxfordshire Cull Zone 49 which had completed 4 years of intensive culling).

Professor David MacDonald reviewed the evidence base for the current cull policy for the Badger Trust⁵ (November 2023). He concluded “*in 2023, much as in 2007, it is hard to see that killing badgers will make a meaningful contribution*”.

Sadly, - to our knowledge – none of you spoke up in support of his review.

An important new paper “Absence of effects of widespread badger culling on tuberculosis in cattle” by Torgerson et al⁶ raises fundamental 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.
Join us in calling for an immediate end to the badger cull.**

REFERENCES

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2. Donnelly, C. A. et al. Positive and negative effects of widespread badger culling on tuberculosis in cattle. *Nature* 439, 843–846 (2006)
3. 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
4. *Birch et al., published in Nature, February 2024*)
5. A commentary on Current Policy. A preamble to the Badger Trust's report 'Tackling Bovine Tb together, David W Macdonald, Dept Biology, Oxford
6. 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)
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