

Open Letter to Professor Christl Donnelly

From the Trustees of Oxfordshire Badger Group

OXFORDSHIRE BADGER GROUP AND 51,000 PETITIONERS CALL ON YOU TO SPEAK OUT AGAINST BADGER EXTERMINATION.

We first presented our petition – then at over 13,000 signatures - to you, other authors of the RBCT and senior members of the Dept of Biology in April and July of this year.

Our petition and open letter “Oxford University's Scientists Must Speak Out Against Badger Extermination” now has over 51,000 signatures¹. We present it today and ask you to respond properly to criticisms of your analysis of the Randomised Badger Culling Trial and to the new scientific evidence that the badger cull is not effective in controlling bovine TB (bTB).

Your approach to one of the major animal welfare issues of the day is not scientifically principled or ethical. You are enabling DEFRA and Natural England to ignore new evidence and keep on culling regardless. Your stubborn insistence that badgers are culpable for the spread of bovine Tb has already cost the lives of half the badger population of England and threatens to drive this native mammal to local extinction. This does not help farmers or cattle and is publicly condemned.

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, - no one 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.

Your ‘new’ research published this week in the Royal Society Open Science is confused and inconclusive. Denying that the models all point in different directions serves to confirm that the RBCT findings are not robust. It seems that you still believe – and are training a new generation of statisticians to believe:

- a. that cattle don’t give TB to badgers [now proven by whole genome sequencing]
- b. that OTFS herds were not infected in the RBCT when science in 2018 showed they 100% were [there was no significance when confirmed and unconfirmed reactors were considered]
- c. that some kind of magical ‘onward transfer’ means a theoretical badger to cattle infection will be passed on faster than a cattle infection

None of this explains why slaughtering badgers on an industrial scale has shown no measurable disease control benefit. Defend your science if you must; but understand that not to call for an end to the cull makes you directly responsible for this ongoing tragedy – one that YOU could easily help stop.

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 you 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.

We will send the petition signatures and comments to you electronically

22nd August 2024

REFERENCES

1. <https://www.change.org/StopOxfordshireEpiCulls>
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)
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-024-67160-0>

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