

## Ken Thompson: 'badger culling is a stupid idea'

A leading biologist has condemned the badger cull as a 'political decision' to appease a 'very powerful farming lobby'



The badger cull has been described as a 'stupid idea' by a leading biologist at the Hay Festival Photo: Alamy

By Rupert Hawksley

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Leading plant biologist Ken Thompson has delivered a withering attack on the Government's badger cull, describing it as a "stupid idea" which was "made inevitable by political expediency."

Speaking to The Telegraph after appearing at the Hay Festival on Wednesday morning, Dr Thompson, who also dismissed the idea of a grey squirrel cull, said: "The government spent a fortune over many years looking at the effects of culling. They carried out a lot of experiments and spent a lot of money looking at the way culling has worked or not worked in other countries.

"The conclusion from all that research was that essentially culling doesn't work. The only circumstances under which culling works is if you can make the cull so complete over such a large area that badgers are effectively eradicated. Clearly then it works because if there are no badgers, there is no tuberculosis (TB).

"But if you leave any badgers, all that happens is the ones that you haven't killed just tear off into the distance and found new colonies. You move the problem around but you don't actually solve it.

"The solution is vaccination: either the badgers or the cattle."

Thompson, whose latest book *Where Do Camels Belong?* The story and science of invasive species, believes that the government felt pressured into acting, despite the overwhelming evidence that culling would not work.

"The Government went ahead and, forgive me for being a tad cynical about this, but I think the Government went ahead because there is a very powerful farming lobby out there who were saying 'do something because we have a real problem.' I'm not denying the problem because we [do] have a real problem here. We've got cattle getting TB and every year we have people having to kill parts of their herds. The Government is saying: 'We can't go on like this so we have to do something. Okay, so we know from the research that culling isn't going to work but give it a go, try something.'

"It's a political decision, it's a classic decision made inevitable by political expediency rather than following the science saying it doesn't work."

The badger cull, which was conducted last year, has been widely criticised, with shadow farming minister Huw Irranca-Davies describing it as a "catastrophic, categoric and unequivocal failure".

Queen guitarist Brian May, who attended the Hay Festival earlier this week, has also been outspoken in his criticisms and said last year that the proposal was an "indefensible piece of rubbish".

Thompson also suggested that it was "too late" to cull grey squirrels, explaining that "in terms of eradicating grey squirrels, that ship has sailed."

"The trouble with grey squirrels is that it's too late. They are far too common, far too well established. The best you can do with grey squirrels is to contain them."

## **IN PICTURES:** Hay Festival 2014

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