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The badger cull that died a death

The West Country scheme to reduce the number of the creatures, responsible for the spread of bovine TB, quickly became a battleground



Trial and tribulation: the antagonism caused by the badger cull was rarely out of the news Photo: Alamy



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By **Harry Wallop and Radhika Sanghani**

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A "catastrophic, categoric and unequivocal failure" is how Huw Irranca-Davies describes the controversial badger-culling trial that came to a halt in West Gloucestershire last weekend.

As shadow farming minister, it is perhaps not surprising that he is critical of the Department of Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (Defra) policy. But he is not the only one to think that the attempt to shoot a few thousand nocturnal animals in the West Country will hardly be remembered as the Government's finest hour.

The RSPCA, badger campaigners, scientists, the local police, and even

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many Conservative backbenchers believe that the failure of the project – part of a long-running battle to reduce bovine tuberculosis among the dairy and beef herds of Britain – has been symptomatic of Whitehall’s failure to understand science and, indeed, the ways of the countryside.

But for those farmers at the heart of the so-called fiasco in west Gloucestershire, the reason the cull failed could be reduced to one word: protesters.

“It’s just anarchy out there,” says James Griffiths, 47, shaking his head. For the past 11 weeks, his 600-cattle dairy farm near Gloucester has been infiltrated by activists, some peaceful, some aggressive, and some downright frightening, particularly the balaclava-wearing saboteurs (“sabs”), who would swear, shout and let off rape alarms during the middle of the night.

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The second-generation farmer is of robust stock, but even he says: “Its been pretty tough on us. We’ve just about had enough.”

Griffiths is the first farmer within the 132-square-mile culling zone to speak out publicly. All the others are too worried about threats they may face from protesters. But his experience, say those within the National Farmers Union (NFU), was typical. As Charles Mann, a beef farmer from Lechlade – outside the cull area – and a former county chairman of the NFU, says: “It’s been pretty bloody intimidating.”

For Griffiths, one of worst aspects was not the regular shouts of “we know where you f----- live”, nor the constant ringing of his phone, which means he no longer answers his landline. It was the fretting about his 83-year-old mother who lives next door. “She shuts up shop at half past four, won’t answer the door and turns the lights off, because she says with the lights on they can see her. She sits there in the dark. She’s worried.”

The two pilot schemes ordered by Defra, which were undertaken in Somerset and Gloucester, had a threefold objective: the shooting of badgers as they wandered the countryside at night was to be undertaken safely, humanely and effectively.

Most agree that it was safe. No one was injured, despite the cull taking place at night and the high levels of intimidation. Most agree the killing was humane – no wounded badgers have been reported.

It is the effectiveness of the pilot that is being debated so fiercely. The two cull pilot schemes were carried out by private contractors, funded by the farmers on whose land the project was undertaken. Those actually wielding the rifles were mostly professional pest controllers, who had to have Defra-approved training.

Mann says that the nightly protests were the key reason not as many badgers were culled as expected. “The contractors were told if there was any chance of interaction with a protester, they had to withdraw. You can imagine the impact that has when there are car-loads and van-loads of protesters climbing in and out vehicles and rushing down footpaths. It prohibits a vast amount of culling opportunity.”

Harry Wallop »

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Griffiths estimates that there were about 100 agitators per night in Gloucestershire, comprising a mixture of the peaceful Wounded Badger Patrol, who wore high-visibility jackets, and stuck to footpaths, as well as “sabs” and “antis” who tended to spread out.

Locals believe that the police were not nearly robust enough in protecting the farmers and allowing the cullers to go about their lawful business.

Dennis Goulding, 81, has run an arable and beef farm in Newent for 58 years. He is still farming, with the help of his two sons, but fears the bovine TB will affect his livelihood if the badgers are not culled. “They have got to do something about it, but the main problem is the protesters. They have caused a lot of problems. The police haven’t been very hard on them.”

Farmers are particularly frustrated that an injunction the NFU took out to protect the cullers and farmers from intimidation failed to be enforced. Time after time, farmers were harassed or made to endure phone calls in the middle of the night.

The police say they bent over backwards to ensure the cullers went about their legal business, while the protesters went about theirs.

Martin Surl, the police and crime commissioner for Gloucestershire, says the injunction failed to work because the farmers frequently did not offer up evidence to press charges. That explains, in his view, why there were 38 arrests in the county, but only a very small number of people charged. “The injunction was a civil one, brought by the NFU. And the farmers failed to enforce it,” he says.

The official independent inquiry into the cull pilots has just started, so it is impossible to quantify exactly how much of an impact the protesters had. But the figures for how many badgers were culled have been published and they make for pretty sobering reading. Defra said that it needed to cull 70 per cent of the estimated 2,800 badgers in the Gloucestershire area to call it a success. After the initial period, 30 per cent were culled, though a greater success rate was recorded in the Somerset pilot area.

Defra then extended the culling period, with Owen Paterson, the Secretary of State, famously claiming the badgers had “moved the goalposts”. But even after Defra revised its estimate for the number of badgers in the area from 3,368 to 2,350, it still failed to reach its target. As of last weekend, just 39 per cent – 912 animals – had been killed.

Opponents say this is conclusive proof that the pilot scheme has failed. David Bowles, head of public affairs at the RSPCA, says: “The results are in. It’s a big no. It failed to meet its targets for the number of badgers culled, it failed to meet the timeframe in which to cull them.”

Irranca-Davies adds: “The policing costs have now quadrupled since the Government’s initial estimate because of the extension and because of the level of legitimate and, I suspect, some illegitimate protests. It has now got to the stage when many people are rightly saying that cage, trap and vaccination would be a great deal cheaper than shooting.”

Indeed, it is estimated that the policing bill for Gloucestershire alone was just shy of £2 million for the 11-week pilot programme. This works out at about £2,000 for each badger killed. For many, this is confirmation that the badger cull failed the third test Defra set: effectiveness.

Some believe the project may have even made the situation worse. The killing of a relatively small number of creatures will have encouraged surviving badgers – many of them infected with TB – to disperse to other areas. “If I was a cattle farmer just outside the cull area, and my herd suddenly became infected with TB, I’d be blaming the farmers who did

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the shooting for infecting my cattle," says Bowles.

And yet most of the farmers in the area say that, in fact, the scheme was a success and that a far greater percentage of badgers has been shot than most people realise. They claim their pilot has not just been sabotaged by protesters on the ground, but by all those who have failed to grasp the bigger picture: eradicating bovine TB, which cost taxpayers £100 million last year, a figure that could rise to £1 billion over the next decade.

"It's an easy story to put out [that it failed]," says Mann. "People who claim it is a disaster need to be careful they are not contaminating their agenda. If Defra pulled the plug on culling, you are condemning the cattle industry to nine more years of slaughter."

It will take three years before it is possible to ascertain from TB figures in the county's herd whether this highly controversial and costly scheme has had any effect. But Griffiths, despite the threats and sleepless nights on his farm, says it is worthwhile pursuing. The cull, he believes, must go on.



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