

BADGER GROUP

The Badger Group has been in operation for over four years. One of the original aims was the recording of badger setts throughout the county. However, since recent legislation has afforded some protection to badger setts, the emphasis has changed from a systematic survey, designed to provide current detail on badger distribution and population, to the more necessary recording of setts which are most vulnerable to interference.

About one third of the original 96 km squares which formed the planned formal survey have been examined, having been chosen as representative of the mix of habitats, land use, geology and topography of the county. Once finalised, the results should provide basic information of badger range, distribution and population. Some setts are visited regularly, providing a useful continuity of recording.

Surveying badger territories has also become a regular activity, particularly in relation to the development of land for building. Several times we have been successful in having developments redesigned to accommodate the badgers, including the construction of artificial setts. Our ultimate intention must be to afford badger foraging areas the same level of protection as the setts.

Records are often gathered whilst investigating a reported problem or incident, allowing us not just an opportunity to record badgers and their setts, but also to educate the public. As a result we now have records of over 2500 setts and the Group and its work is well known across the country. The widespread publicity surrounding badgers encourages members of the public to contribute to our records, which is especially important with regard to road casualties. It is estimated that, nationally, 45,000 badgers a

year are killed in traffic accidents. The collection of records at 'black spots' has helped to gain support for the construction of underpasses on our increasingly busy roads. Usually such work has to await a road improvement but last year saw our first construction of an underpass on an existing road with traffic delayed only for one day.

Perhaps the largest problem we, and badgers, face is the increased incidence of bovine tuberculosis (TB) recently reported, for example in Exmoor cattle. This is of concern to everyone, especially with increased incidence of human tuberculosis. For us all, the whole situation and mis-information we read in the news is confusing and worrying. The eminent scientists involved in this issue, although each may be held in high regard, continue to argue both over accepted facts and hypotheses from opposed positions. The impact on badgers stems from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) policy of eradicating badgers in the belief that they are the source of infection for bovine TB in cattle, when no cattle to cattle transmission has been found.

We should look at some basic facts. There is no scientific evidence to prove that badgers transmit the disease to cattle, nor indeed that cattle transmit the disease to badgers. The eradication policy has been unsuccessful in that it has not resulted in a reduction of the disease particularly in the South West.

The test procedure in cattle is questionable in terms of accuracy and selectivity. Both false negatives and false positives can result so that either infected cattle are released with the potential to infect others, or are unnecessarily slaughtered. The recently-developed live test procedure for badgers, proposed as a part of the revised MAFF policy, also has questionable accuracy when applied to individual animals. Consequently, the eradication of all animals in a sett is planned when just one animal reacts positively to the test.

There has been very little research into the incidence of the disease in other possible vectors which could support the survival of the disease bacillus. We really do need a more enlightened approach and an integrated strategy that at least includes accurate testing, vaccine development, improved husbandry and an adequate moratorium control area, supported by realistic compensation for cattle losses.

The Badger Group is involved with many other aspects of conservation work and enjoys the challenge that it presents. New members will always be welcome, and can be sure of help in extending their knowledge of badgers. Should you wish to learn more about, or help with, the work of the Badger Group then please contact the Secretary, Pauline Kidner (0278 783250) or Membership Secretary, Hazel Wood (0934 712784).