‘Who can tell?’ said the Badger. ‘People come – they stay for a while, they flourish, they build – and they go. It is their way. But we remain. There were badgers here, I’ve been told, long before that same city came ever to be. And now there are badgers here again. We are an enduring lot, and we may move out for a time, but we wait, and are patient, and back we come. And so it will ever be.’ (Kenneth Grahame, *Wind in the willows*, 1970 [1908]: 80).

It is the final of the Eisteddfod in Cardigan town in the summer of 2009 and a large audience has gathered to hear some of the finalists, including the ‘choir of choirs’. The music is superb, the adjudicators’ comments knowledgeable and the atmosphere agreeable. My companion and I have just been remarking on the great benefits of the Welsh eisteddfod system and the cultural opportunities it gives to a wide range of people when the compere announces the arrival of the chief guest. She is the Minister for Environment and Rural Affairs in the Welsh Assembly and she is introduced as ‘the person who is going to do something about bovine TB and the badgers’. There is an instant round of loud applause. The Minister, Elin Jones, had recently announced that there is to be a complete cull of badgers in north Pembrokeshire, just across the county border. When she speaks to the Eisteddfod audience, it is to state that she is a farmer’s daughter and she knows how farmers are suffering from bovine TB. She also argues that the eisteddfod system, and the perpetuation of Welsh culture generally, is dependent upon the continuation of farming in Wales.

Farming here, as in much of the rest of the UK, is in the doldrums. Farmers complain of the low prices paid for their products, especially by the supermarkets, of the restrictions imposed by government ministries and EU regulations, of the endless form-filling, and of the Welsh weather, with 2009 seeing exceptionally high summer rainfall for the second year in a row. They are concerned that the payments (subsidies?) they get are going to be cut. Moreover, in the recent past, farmers have endured several waves of animal diseases: BSE (bovine somatropin encephalitis), foot and mouth disease, blue tongue, and bovine tuberculosis (bTB), the last two of which are still problematic.

In north Pembrokeshire, such problems are often exacerbated because many farms are small and some of the hillland can only be used for grazing. As in other parts of the UK, many farmers are leaving the industry, or their sons (and daughters) are not entering it. Many of those who stay in the business have to find off-farm work to supplement their farming income. Small wonder, then, that a disease like bTB, the incidence of which is increasing in some areas (‘hot spots’) like north Pembrokeshire, causes great concern in the farming community. Farm animals are regularly tested for bTB, and if a cow tests positive it has to be slaughtered. The disease is increasing rapidly: over 12,000 cattle were slaughtered in Wales because of bTB in 2008, compared with only 669 in 1997. The farmers receive compensation for slaughtered animals and the cost of this to the Welsh Assembly has risen from £1.8m in 2000/01 to £15.9m in 2007/08. According to the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), it is reckoned that it could exceed £80m by 2014. It has to be noted that there has been a huge increase in the level of testing and in the numbers of cattle tested—hence compensation payments have increased because more cattle are tested more quickly.

One farmer in north Pembrokeshire explained its effect on his farm:

I have lost cattle to bTB and it is very upsetting. I lost a number of good heifers, and some of them had just calved. They took the heifers away for slaughter because they had tested positive (with the skin test) and so then I had several newborn calves on the yard. I had to feed them for several days of course until the lab tests came back proving whether or not the mothers had indeed had bTB. It would have been kinder to shoot them immediately, but they wanted them kept. When the confirmation came, they took them away.

Q. Do you get enough compensation?

I got a good price at the time, but when I came to replace them, the price had risen to almost double! That’s because there’s now a shortage – so many cattle have been slaughtered […] And they are running out of money for the compensation.

Culling badgers

Badgers are one of the largest mammals found in the wild in the British Isles; they are also one of the most secretive, with nocturnal habits. They are social animals who live in large setts underground. They have achieved a curious status in popular perception, perhaps fostered by the classic

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I am very grateful to all of the people who agreed to talk to me on this topic, some of whom also commented on drafts of this paper. In accordance with promises of confidentiality, I will not mention them by name. I also thank Lionel Caplan for reading several drafts, Janice Williams for helpful discussions and the two anonymous AT reviewers for their pertinent points.

1. ‘Eisteddfod’ literally means a session, but is used today to refer to Welsh competitive festivals of literature, music and performance, which are held all over the country.
2. Notably the Single Farm Payment, paid mainly from EU funds.
4. From about 23% of herds each year to almost 100%, and from 300,000 animals to 1.4 million annually.

7. This literally means ‘Wales Welsh’ and could best be translated as ‘really Welsh’. For some discussions of Welsh identity see Bowie 1993, Trosset 1993 and Davies and Jones 2003.

8. The Tivy-side (www.tivy-sideadvertiser.co.uk), the Fishguard County Echo (http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/fishguard-today.co.uk/tn/) and the Western Telegraph (http://www.westerntelegraph.co.uk).


10. Farmer’s Union of Wales (www.fuw.org.uk) and NFU-Cymru (www.nfucymru.org.uk).


12. A wider cull is also supported by the UK-wide National Farmers Union.

13. In actual fact, the number with BTB is rather small. For example there are several sets of badger TB statistics on DEFRA or WAG websites. The WAG roadkill survey of 2006/7 shows a prevalence rate of 12% for all of Wales (n=459 of which 55 were positive) while for Pembrokeshire the rate is 14.5% (n=55 of which 8 were positive). See also http://cvi.asm.org/cgi/content/abstract/CVI.08424-09v1ref.

5. This decision in Wales was taken despite the fact that the ISG challenged the King report (Boume et al, www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/tb/isg/documents/isg-responsonetosrkng.pdf) and that at a meeting between the two in June 2007 some of the conclusions drawn by King were withdrawn or modified (www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/diseases/answer82011312701.htm).

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children’s novel Wind in the willows, in which the Badger, represented as a wise and down-to-earth character, plays a major role (see front cover of this issue). The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales (like other Wildlife Trusts in the UK) uses a badger’s head as its symbol, and some tourists come to the area specifically for ‘badger-viewings’. Such enthusiasm on the part of some does not, however, mean that there is no ‘badger-baiting’, which, although illegal, as badgers are currently a protected species, continues in some country areas, including north Pembrokeshire.

Badgers are also carriers of bTB and, as they share fields and pastures with cattle, have been held by some to be largely responsible for its transmission and the recent increase in incidence and prevalence. The phrase frequently used is that they constitute “a reservoir of disease”. Although badgers feed largely on worms which they obtain by grubbing up the sward of grassland (rather as pigs do – the Welsh for badger is moch daear, literally ‘earth pig’) they are also happy to eat animal feed, either from food-stores, if they can gain access, or from stocks left in the fields for cattle. It is through such habits that they are thought to contribute to the transmission of the disease to other animals.

There has been official concern in the UK for some years about bTB, and several studies have been carried out seeking to identify both causes and remedies. In England, the government set up an Independent Scientific Group which, after a decade of work, issued its report in 2007 and concluded that culling badgers would be unlikely to solve the problem of bTB (ISG 2007). Subsequently the Westminster government decided not to go ahead with a cull in England. Shortly thereafter, however, the UK government’s then Chief Scientist, Sir David King, used both the Independent Scientific Group’s final report and a number of other studies to argue for a cull of badgers (King 2007). It is the King Report which has been used by the Welsh Assembly to justify the decision to cull all badgers in the ‘intensive action pilot area’ (IAPA) of north Pembrokeshire.\(^9\)

North Pembrokeshire and the WAG

This part of Wales is characterized by its uplands, dominated by the Preseli Hills, which are the site of summer grazing for sheep and semi-feral ponies. It also has lowlands of fertile valleys and flatter coastal areas, where there is more mixed farming, including dairy, beef and cereals. The whole of the coastline and the Preseli Hills together comprise the Pembrokeshire National Park, which attracts a large number of tourists who come for walking, sailing, birdwatching, horse-riding and many other activities, including visiting its many ancient monuments. Although tourism plays an important part in the economy of the area, there is sometimes friction between the demands of tourism and local residents, especially farmers. Local people sometimes argue that their needs and views as residents are often ignored, and that those who live within the boundaries of the National Park are subject to rules and regulations which are unduly restrictive and sometimes unfair.

This is traditionally a Welsh-speaking area, although the overall proportion of native Welsh speakers has diminished with the arrival of large numbers of English-speaking incomers who have moved into the area over the last generation. Some of these are affluent retired people or those simply wishing to live in less pressured surroundings, while a few are ‘alternatives’ (‘hippies’ in local parlance) who have set up smallholdings and communities where they can practise some form of self-sufficiency (see Williams 2003). Relations between locally-born Welsh and English incomers here, as elsewhere in Wales,\(^9\) have sometimes been fraught, as the former argue that the latter have pushed up the price of housing and rendered it unaffordable for their children while also diluting the local culture and its most important manifestation, the Welsh language. Recently, this situation has improved somewhat as many of the earlier demands of the Welsh nationalists have been met: there are now Welsh TV and radio stations, road signs prioritize Welsh, and all children learn Welsh in school. Language remains, however, a major issue, and even people who define themselves as Welsh born and bred, but are not able to speak Welsh fluently because they are originally from non-Welsh-speaking parts of Wales, may find their credentials questioned in certain contexts, and are not categorized as Cymra Cymraeg.\(^3\)

The National Park is funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, a body set up some years ago as the result of the British government’s policies on devolution. The Assembly has far fewer powers than the Scottish Parliament, but among the powers that it does possess is a degree of control over matters to do with the environment and agriculture. This enabled it to propose, in the spring of 2007, that there should be a cull of all badgers over a period of several years in north Pembrokeshire. The area was chosen because it is a ‘hot-spot’ of bTB and because its geography was deemed to afford natural (‘hard’) boundaries such as the Preseli Hills, the river Teifi (marking the border between the north of Pembrokeshire and the south of Cardiganshire), and the coast.

Reactions to the badger cull

In the 1990s, together with Janice Williams, I had carried out research in this area on people’s ideas about the relation between food and health (Caplan 1997, Caplan et al. 1998, Williams 1998, 2003). This was the period when BSE was a major concern and even after the food and health project was finished, I continued to work on BSE and monitor its local impact, becoming interested in perceptions of risk as a result (Caplan 2000). One of the findings was that, unsurprisingly, perceptions of the risk of BSE depended largely on who people were: for example farmers – most of them Welsh-speaking – did not stop eating beef (as one of them said: ‘we never even thought of doing so’), whereas other people in the area did, at least for a time. It occurred to me that the issue of the cull was similarly likely to arouse fairly predictable reactions among different social categories of the local population, notably rural as opposed to urban and Welsh- as opposed to English-speakers. This initial assumption appeared to be confirmed by the reaction cited above to the appearance of the Minister for Environment and Rural Affairs at the Eisteddfod. I was to find, however, that the situation was somewhat more complex.

During the summer of 2009, I talked to a range of residents in North Pembrokeshire about their reactions to a possible badger cull. This was a small, opportunistic sample, but I also kept a close watch on the three local newspapers’ whose letter pages were filled with local
14. The Westminster government proposes to trial vaccination of badgers by injection from 2010, and to use an oral bait vaccine from 2014. Although there is a vaccine against BTB in cattle, after vaccination it is impossible to test cattle for the presence of BTB, as vaccinated animals would be ‘positive reactors’. See http://www.defra.gov.uk/ foodfarm/farmanimal/diseases/ atoz/tb/abouttb/badgers.htm and http://www.defra.gov.uk/ foodfarm/farmanimal/diseases/ atoz/tb/abouttb/badgers.htm

15. This includes increased bio-security on farms, more frequent testing and tighter controls on animal movements.


18. I have been visiting this part of Wales regularly since 1972.

19. Many ponies end up as meat in France; rabbits are sometimes trapped or shot for food.

20. Fox hunts in Wales operate largely as ‘fox control societies’, or at least ostensibly so. Paradoxically, the bill to outlaw hunting with dogs was introduced by the MP for Carmarthenshire West and Pembrokeshire South, Nick Ainger.

21. There does not appear to be a Welsh translation of this book, although some native Welsh speakers told me that they had read it in English.


25. The Tuberculosis Eradication (Wales) Order 2009 (c. 20)


views, the farming press\(^2\) as well as on the BBC news website and those of national newspapers. In addition, I looked at the websites of the farmers’ organizations,\(^12\) the Welsh Assembly (www.wales.gov.uk), the Department of Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA, http://www.defra.gov.uk), the Countryside Alliance (www. countryside-alliance.org.uk) and organizations concerned with wildlife and animals.\(^11\) Since then I have continued to monitor the situation virtually, and over the Christmas and New Year period I also conducted a number of lengthy telephone interviews with local people. From all of this data, it is clear that views vary considerably and sometimes rather unpredictably.

Unsurprisingly, given the support of the Welsh farming unions\(^12\) and much of the farming press for the cull, a number of farmers and smallholders were unequivocally in favour of the cull:

I am in favour. They are nice to look at but they are a nuisance, and something has to be done. People’s livelihoods are involved. Farming is a hard business and this is making it worse. I know this will cause problems – some people will not want the badgers killed. There will be protests. And the police don’t want to know.

Q. Do you think most people around here want the cull? Yes, definitely. I have lost cattle to BTB and it is very upsetting. (Welsh-speaking farmer)

But some English-speaking farmers and smallholders were also in favour:

We have badgers and we have cattle, and I would rather have one than the other.

Q. Would you be in favour of a cull? Yes, I would, the badgers are a damned nuisance. They block drains, they dig up land. They can have the mountain [to live on]. (English-speaking smallholder)

Most of those who expressed support for the proposed cull cited either their own experience of losing animals, which had clearly been both financially and emotionally difficult, or a popular version of the scientific evidence adduced by the Welsh Assembly and the farming unions. I frequently heard it said by local farmers, for example, that ‘When they test dead badgers (many of which are killed on the roads), most of them have bTB’, although such a statistic is quite inaccurate.\(^13\)

However, not all of those engaged in farming favoured the cull, nor was it always the case that all Welsh farmers did so:

I have badgers and I am not in favour of the cull and would not allow it on my land. My neighbour on one side is in agreement with me, but the neighbour on the other has lost cattle [to bTB] so presumably would not agree and would want the cull. (English-speaking smallholder)

As a farmer I am not in favour, our farm has badgers but we raise cattle and we have not had bTB. My father has farmed here for decades and lived alongside the badgers – he says that badgers are not a problem. (Welsh-speaking farmer)

To tell the truth, I think it’s (bTB) more to do with the farming methods these days [than badgers]. They move them [cattle] around so much. (Woman from Welsh-speaking farming family)

Those who were not farmers or smallholders were more likely to be opposed to the cull. For example, I asked a woman in a shop in one of the local towns if she knew about the proposed cull, since there were anti-cull leaflets on display, and she said that she did and that it made her feel ‘sick’. Another woman there overheard the conversation and joined in: ‘They can’t kill the badgers, have you seen this week’s [local] paper? The cull is imminent, we have to stop it.’ A third woman in the shop said ‘There are people in this area who are prepared to take direct action [to stop the cull].’ This conversation was in English but I later learned that at least one of the speakers defined herself as Welsh.

In several conversations with people opposed to the cull, there was the thought that it posed a major risk both to the tourism industry and to the sale of Pembrokeshire food products. One interviewee who worked in a food shop told me: ‘People are already asking about the sourcing of some of our products. For example, they don’t want to buy Daioni milk now because of its very public stance in favour of the cull.’

At a meeting of people opposed to the cull, which included (English-speaking) farmers and smallholders, there was considerable emotion expressed. People talked about ‘loving my badgers’. Some saw them as part of the locality and of nature, and argued that badgers had ‘always been there’ and therefore should remain so. Their solution to the problem of bTB was vaccination\(^14\) of badgers: ‘if they can trap them in cages to shoot them, why can’t they trap them and vaccinate them?’ The converse of their opposition to the cull was often criticism of modern farming methods: increasingly large herds, cattle confined to sheds throughout the year, frequent movement of animals (sometimes illegally), in-breeding, and lack of bio-security on farms. But there was also criticism of the policies proposed by the WAG, since it planned to introduce a raft of measures all at the same time,\(^15\) thereby making it impossible to distinguish cause and effect at a later date.

There is also a middle position taken by people who would accept a limited cull in areas where there were deemed to be both too many badgers and infected herds, but refuse to countenance a blanket cull.

However, quite a number of people to whom I talked were unsure about whether or not there should be a cull, and whether, if either, it were to take place, it would have any effect. They cited either their own knowledge of the behaviour of badgers and the sheer practical difficulty of eliminating badgers in toto, or the inconclusive evidence in the existing studies.

We don’t know exactly [whether badgers contribute to bTB], but the reservoir of infection has to be cleared out. However, whether the cull will work or not we don’t know – when they are disturbed, badgers pack their bags and move – so there is a
risk of it spreading further afield. And then the authorities are saying that to cull all badgers is virtually impossible so some will be left. (Welsh-speaking farmer)

The farmer here is referring to the ‘perturbation effect’ which was one of the main reasons given in the Independent Scientific Report for deciding against a cull. The same farmer also noted that, in his view, it was not possible to argue that it was only bad farming practices that caused the spread of bTB, since he knew ‘very good farmers who even sleep with their cattle when necessary’ who had lost animals, and ‘bad farmers’ who had not. Like many others to whom I spoke, he argued that the navel in the coffin for badgers had come from the slaughter of a herd of 800 cattle belonging to the Welsh organic milk producer, Daioni, in early 2009.16

Potential responses to the cull
How do people think they will react if the cull starts? Will they try and stop access to their land to prevent ‘their’ badgers being killed? Will they join a local campaign group such as Pembrokeshire Against the Cull/Atal y Cwilio Sir Benfro (www.pembrokeshireagainsthetcull.org.uk) or the UK-wide Badger Trust, which has six local groups in Wales, and which in late 2009 launched an application for a judicial review of the WAG decision to cull badgers?17

In the summer of 2009, landowners in the projected area received letters from the local office of the Animal Health Division of WAG, asking them to receive a visit to establish the boundaries of their land. At the conclusion of the visit, people were asked whether or not they had badgers on their land. Some people to whom I talked had refused to co-operate:

When the Animal Health people came, I refused to co-operate with them – why should I tell them what my boundaries are and make their work easier? There is lots of land round here where boundaries and ownership is a grey area. I told them that this cull will polarize communities. Farmers and incomers will be split. I said that none of my neighbours will let you onto their land and there will be civil disobedience.

Q. What did they say?
‘Fair enough,’ and went away. So I’ve been as difficult as I can be. (English-speaking smallholder)

Remember to plan ahead.
TB pre-movement testing rules apply to cattle movements to and from both grass keep and linked holdings.

Here the issues are complex, and pertain not only to identity as farmer/smallholder or non-farmer, but also to identification with a particular community. For example, a Welsh townswoman said that, while she did not like the idea of the cull, she understood why many farmers were in favour. Similarly, some Welsh-speaking farmers who expressed scepticism or even opposition to the cull were well aware that joining an anti-cull campaign might be construed as failing to support neighbours who had lost cattle and thus were unwilling to ‘break ranks’ and criticize the cull in public. The same situation applied equally to some English-speakers who were long-time residents of the area, especially those who had made the effort to learn Welsh, sent their children to Welsh-medium schools and saw themselves as part of the local community. Such people were reluctant to condemn the cull publicly, even when they disapproved of it:

I have badgers and I would not want them culled. And I think it [the cull] could be very confrontational. But if you resist [the cull], you would be deemed a ‘daffy English’ – is it worth the argy? I just hope our area won’t be included. (English-speaking smallholder)

Clearly, then, the ground is set for the possibility of confrontations between those sent to carry out the cull and those who would defend badgers. But there is also the possibility of splits in communities whose inhabitants have tried hard in the past few decades to get along together: English-speakers who have learned Welsh, Welsh-speakers who have come to accept incomers who have been there for a long time and proved their commitment to local communities. Thus differences in language and perceived ethnicity become all too readily available channels for the expression of difference of views about the cull. In other words, the popular perception is that the debate divides neatly along ethnic and linguistic lines, whereas this is far from being the case, as I have tried to show.

Badgers and other animals
One of the questions which interested me was why badgers evoke such strong reactions, being sometimes ‘loved’ and bearing a heavy weight as symbols of wildlife, and in other cases, viewed as pests and fair game for sport. I asked a number of people about their views on other wild animals in the area such as wild ponies, rabbits, grey squirrels and foxes, and also used my own long-term local knowledge.18 The first two are both used for human consumption,19 while grey squirrels and foxes are deemed to be pests and are sometimes shot or hunted,20 as indeed are mink and otters. Yet in this area there has been no sustained campaign against any of these practices similar to that against the plan to cull badgers. One farmer commented of fox-hunting that ‘Most people – except the “alternatives” – accept this and those who don’t want the hunt to come on their land can say so.’ Another rural dweller, a non-farmer, remarked: ‘The landscape isn’t great for it, and there is an acceptance that there is a need to control foxes’ numbers and keep a balance, as well as saving most of the chickens.’ An ‘alternative’ smallholder said: ‘If a fox is killing my chickens, I would kill the fox.’ In other words, as another smallholder strongly opposed to the badger cull noted, ‘I don’t think I have an issue with killing animals which themselves kill domestic animals.’ Yet all four of these people were strongly opposed to the badger cull.

So why has this proposal to cull badgers provoked such strong reactions, and what did people have to say about these animals? On the positive side, badgers were described as ‘iconic’, ‘beautiful’, ‘mysterious’, ‘interesting’, ‘our largest wild mammal’. Some of those who spoke in this way recognized that badgers (like other animals) have been anthropomorphized in English-language


generation. Although there is a great deal of literature available, much of it on the web, the likely effects of a cull are as yet unknown, particularly as it is proposed to implement it in conjunction with a much more frequent testing regime and improved bio-security on farms. Studies have been carried out of culls conducted in other countries, but the evidence from these is not conclusive, and they are often cited by both sides.\(^2\) In other words, the use of scientific evidence is highly selective (see also Wilkinson 2007).

The second aspect of many arguments is the emotional, although in the case of the pro-cull lobby, it is not the fate of the badgers but the devastation caused to farming families by bTB. For example, there is an extensive set of documents about bTB on the Welsh Assembly website (www.wales.gov.uk/bTB), and the most recent addition at the time of writing this piece was a short video about the effects of the disease on farming families, which has clearly been profound. The Chief Vet is reported as saying that she is tired of having to comfort devastated farmers who lose all or part of their herds. But in the case of those who oppose the cull, it is primarily the badgers who are the subject of emotional responses, even where these are tempered, as they often are, by recognition of the plight of farmers. Paradoxically, each side accuses the other of using emotional arguments, while claiming that its own stance is based on science not emotion.

Economic arguments in favour of the cull are frequently adduced both by the WAG and by farmers, who are afraid that the compensation money will run out. Cattle, both dairy and beef, are a very important part of the Welsh rural economy, and the policy of the Assembly has been to improve the `branding’ of animals reared in Wales, so that Welsh beef, like Welsh lamb, is synonymous with good quality. Some suspect that farmers have profited financially from compensation schemes, even while acknowledging that loss of animals is traumatic. Others, like the farmer cited at the beginning of this article, argue that compensating farmers enables a farmer to replace animals overnight because it takes a long time to build up a good herd. But equally, it is suggested by the anti-cull lobby that the cost of the cull (some £9m over five years) would be better spent on improving bio-security and testing regimes, and on developing and rolling out vaccines for badgers.

More rarely discussed openly are the underlying politics of this situation. The Assembly is currently governed by a coalition of Plaid Cymru and Labour, and both these and the opposition Conservative party have, with few exceptions, supported the cull. Some argue that the WAG’s decision to have a cull is precisely because its devolved powers allow it to do so, and that its members have the `guts’ to do what the Westminster government has refused to do in England. Indeed, the Assembly Minister for the Environment and her Chief Vet recently received Farming Weekly’s award for ‘Farming Champions of the Year’.\(^2\)

Yet paradoxically, for citizens on both sides of the debate, the bTB, badgers and the cull have also come to symbolize the intrusions of an intrusive state. For those against the cull, the Control Order\(^2\) recently passed by the WAG, which allows access to land for the purposes of culling regardless of the owner’s wishes, is seen as draconian, and as threatening civil liberties and human rights. But for those farmers wanting a cull, it is precisely the (English) state’s legal protection of badgers which has led to the present situation. Several people also explained the WAG’s decision to have a cull as being a ‘sop’ to the farmers to persuade them to comply with the ever tighter regulations on testing and cattle movement – `buying off the farmers’ and at the same time playing to the Welsh rural vote, the heart of support for Plaid Cymru.

Badgers thus sit at a fault line in world views. For those who wish to put nature, the environment and sustainable farming first, and for incomers who came to live in West Wales with a ‘dream’, as one of them put it, badgers are its `guts’ to do what the Westminster government has refused to do. Indeed, the Assembly Minister for the Environment and her Chief Vet recently received Farming Weekly’s award for ‘Farming Champions of the Year’.\(^2\)

On the day I finished writing this article, the announcement came from the Minister in the WAG that the badger cull was to go ahead, starting in April of 2010.\(^2\)

\(^{21}\) Some noted that it was precisely for such reasons that there had been pressure to give badgers the legal protection\(^2\) which was enacted in the 1990s. Several people noted that badgers had survived and even prospered in the face of increasingly intensive agriculture, so they had become a symbol of resilience, `a bastion of wild-life resistance’ to the profound changes which have taken place in the countryside over the last few decades, so that `If badgers go, what are we left with?’

\(^{22}\) On the negative side, some (particularly farmers) described them as a ‘nuisance’ regardless of bTB, and as having increased in numbers as a result of their protected status. Several people noted that farmers used to cull badgers on their land when they thought there were too many of them, but now they are not allowed to do so. However, since the WAG had made the decision to move towards a cull, the local press reported a noticeable increase in the number of dead badgers found in the area and it was widely thought that some farmers were taking matters into their own hands.

\(^{23}\) Literature and mentioned their portrayal in Wind in the Willows.\(^2\) Some noted that it was precisely for such reasons that there had been pressure to give badgers the legal protection which was enacted in the 1990s. Several people noted that badgers had survived and even prospered in the face of increasingly intensive agriculture, so they had become a symbol of resilience, `a bastion of wild-life resistance’ to the profound changes which have taken place in the countryside over the last few decades, so that `If badgers go, what are we left with?’

\(^{24}\) Science, emotion, economics and politics

Both sides of this debate adduce scientific arguments to support their stance. Although there is a great deal of literature available, much of it on the web, the likely effects of a cull are as yet unknown, particularly as it is proposed to implement it in conjunction with a much more frequent testing regime and improved bio-security on farms. Studies have been carried out of culls conducted in other countries, but the evidence from these is not conclusive, and they are often cited by both sides.\(^2\) In other words, the use of scientific evidence is highly selective (see also Wilkinson 2007).

The second aspect of many arguments is the emotional, although in the case of the pro-cull lobby, it is not the fate of the badgers but the devastation caused to farming families by bTB. For example, there is an extensive set of documents about bTB on the Welsh Assembly website (www.wales.gov.uk/bTB), and the most recent addition at the time of writing this piece was a short video about the effects of the disease on farming families, which has clearly been profound. The Chief Vet is reported as saying that she is tired of having to comfort devastated farmers who lose all or part of their herds. But in the case of those who oppose the cull, it is primarily the badgers who are the subject of emotional responses, even where these are tempered, as they often are, by recognition of the plight of farmers. Paradoxically, each side accuses the other of using emotional arguments, while claiming that its own stance is based on science not emotion.

Economic arguments in favour of the cull are frequently adduced both by the WAG and by farmers, who are afraid that the compensation money will run out. Cattle, both dairy and beef, are very important parts of the Welsh rural economy, and the policy of the Assembly has been to improve the ‘branding’ of animals reared in Wales, so that Welsh beef, like Welsh lamb, is synonymous with good quality. Some suspect that farmers have profited financially from compensation schemes, even while acknowledging that loss of animals is traumatic. Others, like the farmer cited at the beginning of this article, argue that compensating farmers enables a farmer to replace animals overnight because it takes a long time to build up a good herd. But equally, it is suggested by the anti-cull lobby that the cost of the cull (some £9m over five years) would be better spent on improving bio-security and testing regimes, and on developing and rolling out vaccines for badgers.

More rarely discussed openly are the underlying politics of this situation. The Assembly is currently governed by a coalition of Plaid Cymru and Labour, and both these and the opposition Conservative party have, with few exceptions, supported the cull. Some argue that the WAG’s decision to have a cull is precisely because its devolved powers allow it to do so, and that its members have the ‘guts’ to do what the Westminster government has refused to do in England. Indeed, the Assembly Minister for the Environment and her Chief Vet recently received Farming Weekly’s award for ‘Farming Champions of the Year’.\(^\)

Yet paradoxically, for citizens on both sides of the debate, the bTB, badgers and the cull have also come to symbolize the intrusions of an intrusive state. For those against the cull, the Control Order\(^\) recently passed by the WAG, which allows access to land for the purposes of culling regardless of the owner’s wishes, is seen as draconian, and as threatening civil liberties and human rights. But for those farmers wanting a cull, it is precisely the (English) state’s legal protection of badgers which has led to the present situation. Several people also explained the WAG’s decision to have a cull as being a ‘sop’ to the farmers to persuade them to comply with the ever tighter regulations on testing and cattle movement – ‘buying off the farmers’ and at the same time playing to the Welsh rural vote, the heart of support for Plaid Cymru.

Badgers thus sit at a fault line in world views. For those who wish to put nature, the environment and sustainable farming first, and for incomers who came to live in West Wales with a ‘dream’, as one of them put it, badgers are its ‘guts’ to do what the Westminster government has refused to do. Indeed, the Assembly Minister for the Environment and her Chief Vet recently received Farming Weekly’s award for ‘Farming Champions of the Year’.\(^\)

On the day I finished writing this article, the announcement came from the Minister in the WAG that the badger cull was to go ahead, starting in April of 2010.\(^\)