

BADGERS AND MAIZE

by Mike Mason

Most readers will be appalled that the government are considering a mass cull of badgers – completely eradicating them in certain areas – to counter the spread of bovine TB. However, help may be at hand following a farmer's astonishing experiment.

The farmer had a herd of 600 cattle. About the year 2002 he was in the same situation as neighbouring farmers – he lost stock to bovine TB and the local badgers had TB. Then, for reasons unconnected with the TB problem he decided to go organic. He was astonished to find that his cattle no longer went down with TB. In the subsequent five years he did not have a single case of bovine TB in his herd. All the surrounding farmers' cattle continue to be plagued with TB.

He decided that it was the change of diet which must have been responsible. Previously his cattle were fed largely on maize. When he went organic he fed his cattle largely on clover. He looked into this and found that maize was deficient in two vital trace elements – selenium and iodine. Clover was not deficient in those two trace elements. In other words, his cattle had previously been suffering from malnutrition and thus had reduced defences against an attack of bovine TB.

He tried an experiment with his badgers. Badgers love maize and he felt there was a possibility that they also were suffering from malnutrition. He put buckets of feed rich in the missing two trace elements near their setts. His badgers no longer suffered from TB – but surrounding farmers' badgers continued to suffer.

No need to cull badgers

If this “cure” for bovine TB can be substantiated there would be no need for the government to conduct the proposed mass cull of badgers. All that farmers would have to do is to feed their cattle food supplements containing the two missing trace elements. They could do the same with their badgers and whole swathes of the country could be free of the scourge of bovine TB.

A few thoughts of my own

About the year 1995 badgers started eating the sweetcorn on my allotment. I had grown sweetcorn every year for the previous 20 years without such a problem, despite the fact that one of the badgers' paths went straight through my allotment, sometimes straight through my sweetcorn. There is no doubt that for 20 years sweetcorn was not on their menu. So why the sudden change? The local farmers had just started to grow maize, a crop I had seen often in France but never before in England. Obviously, the badgers had started to eat the maize, developed a taste for it then found “maize” on my allotment. In 3 nights they demolished my entire crop of 137 plants having an average of two cobs each and which were almost ripe. (I now grow my sweetcorn in the garden and have no problems with our friends.)

That fixes the timescale. The farmers in my area started to grow maize for the first time about the year 1995. If cattle have been fed on maize ever since and have thus been suffering from malnutrition ever since, that could explain why the problem of bovine TB has been increasing exponentially, to the increasing frustration of the farmers, the government and badger-lovers. The “plague” could be down to the change of the cattles' diet onto maize. The Badger Trust (<http://www.badger.org.uk/Content/Home.asp>) (0207 228 6444) are “on the case”. Let us hope that the farmer's happy discovery is the answer to this awful problem.

Meanwhile, there is a lesson here for human health. About one third of the UK population is suffering from malnutrition. People may not be aware of this until they go down with some complaint or other which can be ascribed to malnutrition. I don't know how the general public could be checked for

malnutrition - it seems an impossible task. But by growing nutrient-rich food in our gardens and allotments and having a balanced diet we gardeners have a better chance of avoiding malnutrition.

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