

Study finds "no evidence" that badgers give TB to cattle, says Badger Trust

The Badger Trust strongly challenges claims by the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) that "TB could be passed from badgers to cattle" through contact between cattle and badgers in the field[1].

In a paper in an online journal [2], researchers explain how they used data logging equipment to record what they call "contact initiation" between cattle and badgers. On publication, lead researcher Mike Hutchings claimed in a resulting SAC press release that this contact is "a potentially significant area of disease transmission between the species".

But David Williams, chairman of Badger Trust, dismissed the claims: "The idea that badgers 'initiate contact' with cattle is just ludicrous. These claims are absurd and are not even supported by the researchers' own data. Their data loggers recorded a so-called 'contact' when badgers were around two metres away from cattle. That's hardly 'contact': the badgers could have been on the other side of a hedge. And the researchers have conspicuously failed to explain how a badger, whose nose is just a few centimetres off the ground, could transmit bovine TB to a cow that is almost two metres tall and two metres away.

"Around half of all so-called 'contacts' were for barely a second and the researchers even admit that this so-called 'contact' was 'relatively infrequent'. Indeed, over six months less than half the cattle were anywhere near a badger.

"Of course, the study found that cattle are constantly close to one another, even though the equipment was turned down to intentionally minimise the number of cattle to cattle contacts that were recorded. Cattle to cattle - both within herds and between herds - is the obvious way in which bovine TB is spread and maintained and this study provides ample evidence for that transmission route.

"The only interesting finding of this study, which confirms the well documented territorial behaviour of badgers, is that neighbouring social groups of badgers almost never came anywhere near one another. This scotches the view promulgated by farming unions that bovine TB is spread between badger social groups rather than from herd to herd.

"This study simply confirms that cattle to cattle is the most likely route of bovine TB transmission and it provides no firm evidence that a single badger was ever close enough to cattle to infect them with bovine TB."

ENDS

Notes to editors:

1. <http://www.sac.ac.uk/news/currentnews/09n19badgerscows>
2. <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0005016>

For further comment, contact David Williams on 07768 518064

Badger Trust is the only charity solely dedicated to the conservation of badgers across Great Britain.
PO Box 708, EAST GRINSTEAD, RH19 2WN
Tel: 08458 287878 Fax: 02380 233896
E-mail press@badgertrust.org.uk
www.badgertrust.org.uk
Registered charity no.1111440
Company registered in the UK No.5460677