



WHY PROTECT BADGERS?

Badgers in Britain receive strong legal protection through the Protection of Badgers Act 1992. On top of this, Badger Trust with its network of around 80 local Badger Groups seeks to protect badgers in practical ways. Why are so many people devoted to "saving the badger"? What is so special about this particular member of Britain's fauna? Steve Jackson, Chairman of Brockwatch (a local Badger Group in Northamptonshire) attempts to answer these questions.

What is so special about the badger? Well for one thing, the badger is the largest land carnivore left in the British Isles following the extinction of the bear and the wolf. OK, a badger is considerably smaller than a bear (bears weigh up to 200 kilos). Old Brock is smaller than the wolf too (wolves weigh in at 25-50 kg). Even so, at around 10 to 12 kilos in weight and measuring about a metre long from nose to tail, the badger is not a small mammal by any means. Isn't it amazing that on this crowded island, in this modern age, an animal of this size can manage to survive in such good numbers?

Current estimates suggest that Britain's badger population has grown over the last decade or so and now stands at around 300,000. Elsewhere in Europe badger numbers are reported to be declining. This means that this country is one of the species' strongholds. I think that gives us a responsibility to look after our Brocks.

In his poem "The Combe", Edward Thomas (1878 - 1917) describes the badger as "The most ancient Briton of English beasts". Badgers certainly are "ancient Britons" - the earliest fossil remains date back 250,000 years! These black and white beasts have lived alongside us for a very long time. Some of their setts have been occupied by generations of badgers over a great many years. One sett in Derbyshire is even recorded in the Domesday Book. It is not surprising that we have named some of our settlements after them, places like Brockenhurst, Broxbourne, Brockton and Brockhall. Badgers are part of our national heritage.

Edward Thomas' poem also gives us an insight into another aspect of our relationship with the badger. The badger he refers to was dug from its sett, baited with dogs and killed. This was a common pastime in Thomas' day, and had been for hundreds of years. As our attitudes towards other animals became more enlightened during the last century, things improved somewhat. In 1973, the Badgers Act was passed, and further Acts of Parliament followed, including the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, each adding to the badger's legal protection.

However, the practices of badger digging and badger baiting did not stop just because they became illegal, and they continue to this day. As if this were not enough, we also destroy badger setts and feeding grounds with new roads and building developments,

and kill tens of thousands of them on our roads every year. Even the Government has spent a quarter of a century slaughtering thousands of badgers in the misguided hope that this will prevent cattle from contracting bovine tuberculosis. Is it any wonder that "badger" has entered our language not just as the name of a nocturnal mammal, but also as a term meaning to pester or worry someone without mercy?

Although there are places in Britain where badgers are scarce or even absent, the species is not rare or endangered in the country as a whole. However, as we have seen, badgers are vulnerable to human persecution and disturbance. Even with legal protection, they endure a great deal of unnecessary pain, suffering and death at our hands. Can you imagine how much more pain, suffering and death the badger would endure without that legal protection - and without the small army of people who are dedicated to seeing the letter and the spirit of that law enforced?

Badgers do cause problems for people from time to time. Their diggings can undermine roads and buildings occasionally. They cause a certain amount of crop damage. The law allows us to deal with these problems, and they can usually be resolved without any need for badgers to be harmed. As for the charge of infecting cattle with TB, the case is still not proven beyond reasonable doubt and natural justice demands that the badger is innocent until proven guilty.

Badgers do a lot of good too. They are great destroyers of wasps' nests, and for this reason they are welcomed by foresters in particular. They dig out the nests of rabbits too. But above all they provide an increasing number of people with a great deal of enjoyment, by allowing us to watch them at their setts, or even in our gardens. In the hustle and bustle of the modern world, contact with nature is becoming more and more valuable. Close contact with badgers is particularly rewarding.

On the night before I wrote this article, I took a small group of people to watch the badgers living in a sett not far from my home. We watched them with the aid of powerful torches for an hour or so. There were four or five badgers in all, and we were all enthralled by them. Then the badgers were gone, and the spell they had cast over us was broken. We all went away with the feeling that we had seen something very special. Badgers *are* special, and worthy of all the protection we can give them.

Steve Jackson, September 3rd 2000, up-dated November 2008