

Press Release

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**Research shows our attitudes to badgers are rooted in history and unhelpful for policymaking**

Research by Dr Angela Cassidy, an interdisciplinary fellow with the research councils’ Rural Economy and Land Use Programme, shows that our conflicted attitudes to badgers go back well before Kenneth Grahame’s depiction of wise old Mr Badger in *The Wind in the Willows*, and certainly predate arguments about their possible role in spreading bovine tuberculosis among cattle.

Dr Cassidy argues that these ambivalent, but often deep rooted, feelings about “Old Brock” are still colouring today’s debate over bovine tuberculosis and influence how it is covered in the media.

We see dignified depictions of badgers in heraldry, and an early version of Mr Badger even crops up in an Anglo Saxon poetic riddle from the 11th century, as a noble creature defending its family against attack. More recent heroic appearances in children’s literature are common, with *The Wind in the Willows* probably the best known.

So we are familiar with the idea of badgers displaying characteristics that we like to think of as both human and laudable, such as strength, bravery and loyalty, while also being mysterious, nocturnal creatures that are symbolic of the natural world and British countryside.

However, the “bad badger” is also in evidence throughout history. In the sixteenth century badgers were legally designated as vermin, and badger baiting was considered a normal pastime until it was outlawed in 1835. It continues illicitly, of course, even to the present day.

The “bad badger” is in constant conflict with human beings, and current bTB debates often include references to unwelcome behaviours such as crop-raiding, digging and hunting other animals. His appearances in literature are less common, but he is personified in Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Mr Tod* as “Tommy Brock”, an unpleasant, sly, dirty creature who kidnaps a nest of baby rabbits.

Dr Cassidy traces the continuation of this discourse into current arguments about badger culling. She argues that the dichotomy in our framing of the debate has been unhelpful and has made it more difficult for policymakers to find a way forward.

She explained: “From the early 20th century depictions of the “good badger” became dominant, but more recently the verminous and diseased “bad badger” has resurfaced. It is noticeable how the two sides have harnessed the language of war to bolster their arguments, with quite violent rhetoric being used in an increasingly polarised public debate.

“Perhaps if we could recognise that the current bTB debate is actually partly about human relationships with badgers, and that both the “good” and “bad” versions of the badger are exaggerated, this could help move policymaking forwards.

“The concentration on badgers, particularly in the media, has also meant there has been less room for discussions of other aspects of the bTB problem, such as the roles of TB testing or preventative measures in cattle management; or about the broader issues involved with human beings and wild animals living side by side.”

Notes for editors:

1. The research is published in [Sociologia Ruralis volume 52, Issue 2, 192-214](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2012.00562.x/abstract), April 2012 and may be accessed via the link given here.
2. Dr Angela Cassidy is currently working on the *One medicine? Investigating human and animal disease* project at Imperial College, investigating the contemporary One Health movement for managing disease across humans and animals.
3. The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme is an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), with additional funding provided by the Scottish Government and Defra. See [www.relu.ac.uk](http://www.relu.ac.uk) for more information about the Relu programme.
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