

Project Summary to accompany English Nature License No: 20060358

Humaneness and efficacy assessments of a body snare for restraining badgers.

Background

The aim of this study is to assess the humaneness, efficacy and non-target risks of a body snare designed to restrain badgers. Currently Defra is conducting a consultation on “Controlling the spread of bovine tuberculosis in cattle in high incidence areas in England: badger culling”. This consultation is seeking views on the principle of whether to introduce badger culling to help control bovine TB and on options for implementing a cull. If ministers were to decide that the culling of badgers was appropriate in some areas, they would need evidence to inform a decision on culling methods that would be both effective and humane. The proposed study is to assess whether a specially designed body snare for badgers is an effective and humane method of restraint. The body snare is intended to be non-lethal and the purpose of the proposed trials is to assess the snare; the aim is to release all captured badgers back into the wild unharmed.

Study Plan

The study will follow the principles laid down in the draft EU Directive on Humane Trapping Standards whereby the humaneness of a trapping device is first assessed under controlled conditions in pen trials before, if its humaneness is deemed to be acceptable, field trials of the device are conducted to confirm its humaneness and to assess its efficacy and non-target risks.

The body snare has been specifically designed for use with badgers. Reports of badgers being injured in snares refer to those not designed for the capture of badgers but are set for the capture of other species. In addition, to reduce the possibility of the wire cutting into the skin or muscle the cable to be used is wider than that used for fox snares. The body snare has no damaging sharp edges and has two swivels incorporated in the anchor chain to alleviate entanglement from twisting.

The trials are being undertaken in captivity (i.e pen trials) under Home Office Licence with continuous observation by researchers. This will ensure that if any animal is injured during capture immediate assessment and, if necessary, intervention can occur. In the absence of such signs the animals will be restrained for a maximum of eight hours. At the end of the restraint period the badgers will be anaesthetised and examined for injuries by a veterinary surgeon before being left in the pen to recover. During the examination the fur of the badger will be shaved where the body restraint has gripped the body. The badgers will be held for a further four days whereupon the areas of shaved skin will be examined in detail by a veterinary surgeon for signs of sub-dermal damage (i.e. necrosis). This will ensure that no badgers are released back into the wild with late-onset injuries (as has been reported from wire snares). If deemed fit by the veterinary surgeon the animals will be returned to their home sett at dusk the next day. The aim is to release all the captured animals back to the wild unharmed within a maximum of 10 days.

Advice has been gained from veterinary surgeons and badger experts who have confirmed that removing the badger from its home territory for this length of time should not affect the social structure of the family group. A maximum of 20 badgers will be used overall in the pen trials but these will be carried out in a phased manner with a maximum of 4 badgers in any one trial. After each of the trials a report is sent to the Home Office and a decision is made as to whether further trials should continue. In addition one of the trials will determine whether a badger can free itself from the body snare should it become detached from the anchor stake. The anchor chain will be detached from the anchor itself and observations will be conducted to see if the badger is able to divest itself of the snare. If this does not happen within 2 hours the animal will be anaesthetised and the snare removed. This will ensure that this eventuality is covered when the animals can be observed rather than in the field where if the badger escapes no welfare implications can be made. If the body snares are deemed to be humane from the pen trials then a licence will be sought to conduct field trials to determine the efficacy, usability, non-target risk and humaneness of the body restraint under normal operating conditions.