

list as is advocated, say 30 species, that means 1045 species that are currently kept would be made extinct in captivity. These are species that may well have been thriving in captivity for decades, they may be species that are critically endangered in the wild, and yet they would be forced into captive extinction purely on ideological grounds.

Reptiles have been kept as pets since the 17th century, first bred in the 18th century and in the 20th century increased in popularity. In the 21st century they are the third most commonly kept companion animal taxa, just behind dogs and cats numerically. According to a 2021 survey<sup>2</sup> there are 8.8 million pet reptiles kept by private keepers.

When the National Centre for Reptile Welfare (NCRW) was established in 2018 one of the key objectives of the charity was – and still is – to collate data on the health and welfare of captive reptiles and establish why reptiles (and amphibians) are relinquished. The NCRW is the first rescue/rehoming organisation to distinguish between rescues and rehomed animals; most organisations use emotive language like rescue even when that may not actually be the case. In broad terms, 80 per cent of the animals entering the NCRW are relinquished by the owner, and only 20 per cent are actual rescues.

It is often claimed that reptiles entering rescue/rehoming are commonly unwanted pets in poor condition, often suffering from conditions such as metabolic bone disorder (MBD); however, this is not what we see at the NCRW. We do see animals surrendered due to loss of interest, but they accounted for less than 3 per cent of 2126 animals in 2022.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, MBD is often claimed to be prevalent in bearded dragons, but in our experience that is not the case.

Simply because something is stated repeatedly does not mean that it is true; it can simply be the opinion of a vocal minority. Data and evidence are king, and to this end, where is the evidence that driving hundreds of species into captive extinction benefits animal welfare or indeed humanity?

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## PROFESSION

### The meaning of contextualised care

ON reading a recent editorial in *Vet Record* (VR, 15–29 June 2024, vol 194, p 453) concerning the response of the BVA Live gathering in June to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) investigation into the veterinary sector, I was amazed to find that the BVA has reinvented the wheel. It appears the answer to the problems of the profession is 'contextualised care'.

Contextualised care (an opaque and ugly phrase) is described as 'the best care in an individual scenario concerning the patient, the client and any limitations around finance or the ability to comply with available

options' – or in old money putting the client and their animal first.

To my generation (I qualified in 1963) it was understood that membership of a profession entailed providing a service to people who requested it. This concept was nurtured throughout our veterinary course by the teaching staff, and confirmed by the oath we took on admission to the RCVS. I appreciate this does not sit well with present day preoccupation with self, and one's wellbeing, but the contract is the same as it was 60 years ago – your first responsibility is to the animal in your care.

The conundrum of judging what is possible in the way of treatment with the practicality of supplying it has always been with us, and became more acute as medical and surgical techniques advanced. Insurance cover



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for treatment gave hope that this was the answer, but it turned out to be an own goal as the system is open to abuse.

Corporate takeover of practice, with the dead hand of conformity, has intensified the meteoric rise in veterinary fees despite the claimed economies of scale, a situation eloquently explained by Richard Hoile (VR, 18/25 May 2024, vol 194, p 400), and so at present a large swathe of the population cannot afford veterinary fees, nor insurance premiums and possibly cannot afford the cost of humane euthanasia.

It does not have to be like this. First-opinion practice is a fulfilling career if one is in control of events; flexibility is key, small is beautiful. I would urge recent graduates, with their excellent training with emphasis on problem

solving, to be creative in finding an answer to the provision of an efficient low-cost practice that can provide what is needed for the majority of people seeking advice.

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## BOVINE TB

### TB testing and transmission

DICK Sibley's call for open debate on TB testing and transmission<sup>1</sup> is welcome and long overdue. The sentiment that elimination (eradication) of bovine TB (bTB) is going to be difficult, if not impossible, using the current statutory testing

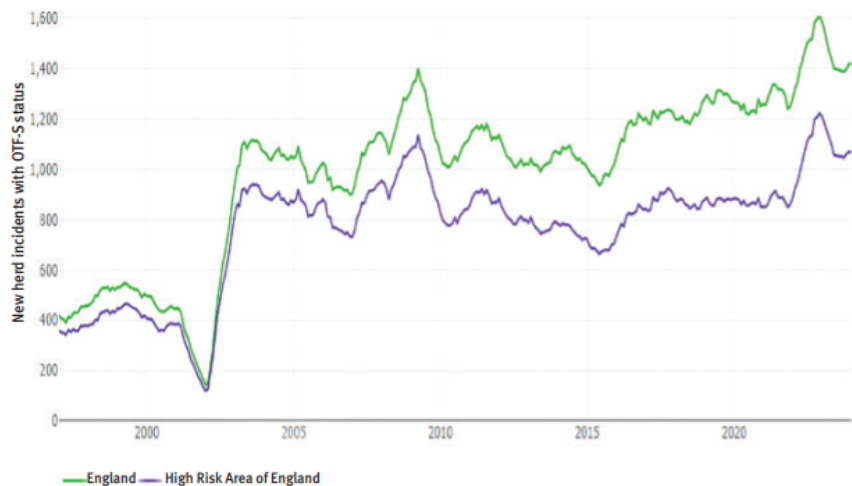
Letters are not peer-reviewed, unless stated.

| Table 1: Bovine TB testing measures tightened 2009–2021 <sup>††</sup>  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Year   | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
| <b>Number of High Risk Area (HRA)/Edge cull areas studied</b>  | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 2    | 2    | 3    | 10   | 21   | 31   | 42   | 52   | 59   |
| <b>Testing measure</b>   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Annual SICCT testing introduced, with movement controls  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Some radial testing  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| SICCT test severe interpretation for Edge Area   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Gamma testing introduced for persistent herds  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| 6-monthly SICCT testing in one (Edge) county   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Short interval SICCT testing for officially TB-free suspended herds introduced at severe interpretation in HRA   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Mandatory parallel gamma testing in HRA  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| 6-monthly SICCT testing introduced in Cheshire, Oxfordshire, Warwickshire and parts of Berkshire, Hampshire and Derbyshire   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| 6-monthly SICCT testing introduced for Staffordshire and Shropshire (HRA)  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| 6-monthly SICCT testing introduced to remainder of HRA   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| *Many of these measures, not mentioned by Birch et al <sup>2</sup> , offer an alternative reason for the reduced officially TB-free withdrawn (OTF-W) herd incidence during periods with badger culling, largely from 2016 |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| †Sources: Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency, APHA and Defra <sup>6–8</sup>  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| SICCT Single intradermal comparative cervical tuberculin   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |

programme is correct. It mirrors the Republic of Ireland's (ROI's) struggle to make progress having used single intradermal comparative cervical tuberculin (SICCT) and gamma testing together since 2002.

Sibley mentions public claims by Defra,<sup>1</sup> based on contested reading of an APHA paper<sup>2</sup> that fails to mention many of the improvements in testing that took place before and since culling commenced (Table 1) adding to the weakness of its inference. A policy consultation on proposals to evolve badger control policy and introduce further cattle measures<sup>3</sup> closed on 13 May, with the responsibility for responding now placed with a newly elected government from 5 July. In April of this year, Peter Brotherton, director of science at Natural England (NE), which licenses badger culling, called for further research in relation to prolonged or 'supplementary' badger culling (SBC), which he said was no longer justified. He also remarked '...it is disappointing that the recent publication by Birch et al 2024 has been widely reported as providing evidence that badger culling reduces the incidence of bTB by 56 per cent, when in fact the study shows the overall impact of implementing a range of bTB control measures, not culling alone.'<sup>4</sup>

Defra then said that it had not prepared for mass badger vaccination



**Fig 1: Officially TB-free suspended (OTF-S) new herd incidents for the English High Risk Area, showing how detection of disease has been constant or slowly rising since the introduction of annual testing. Source: Bovine TB Interactive Dashboard: <http://3.9.48.73/bTB/>**

and the NE board authorised SBC in 26 areas in mid-May to start 1 June 2024.

While the APHA paper does account for prevalence and incidence using officially TB-free suspended (OTF-S) and OTF withdrawn (OTF-W), on careful reading it does not claim badger culling had any effect. Sibley is correct that herds with one or more 'unconfirmed' (an outdated term) reactors have not fallen and are on the rise (Fig 1), with a more robust statutory testing programme finding

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infected herds earlier in the disease cycle. OTF-S is a better indicator of true burden<sup>5</sup> than OTF-W, even if it produces some additional false positives at severe interpretation.

The search for non-clinical bTB cases from point of birth is an essential component of future success. This is now irrefutable and undoes a huge amount of previous research making assumptions about the wrongly labelled 'inconclusive' SICCT test reactors. It heralds a reset in

bTB epidemiology that originates from results of the (too) slow application of tighter measures. The right approach would transform livestock management and might only take a few years, as in the 1960s.

The APHA update for bTB in Great Britain in 2022 is also welcome,<sup>9</sup> offering insight into the direction of travel of epidemiological understanding for the serious ongoing epidemics in Great Britain and Ireland.

Important content includes whole genome sequencing tests in England and Wales suggesting that deer appear almost as heavily infected as badgers, with other farm animals (pigs, sheep, cats) at risk too, but with no apparent monitoring of the brown rat, long reported as a carrier although research remains neglected.

Most notable in a report that charts the gradual decline of OTF-W incidents, Wales now gives OTF-W status to all SICCT test reactors previously rated OTF-S, more accurately reflecting true burden.<sup>5,10</sup> While England, Northern Ireland and the RoI should surely embrace this approach, tracking what is effectively 'stage of infection' will inform elimination in the four countries, which remain inextricably linked by live trade and requiring holistic cooperation. Greater recognition of the in-herd hidden reservoir by the superintending veterinary inspector at the Department of Agriculture in the RoI also suggests a challenging process to change entrenched and outdated beliefs over test interpretation and limitations.<sup>11</sup>

With (OTF-S + OTF-W) confirmed as best representing the rate of detected infection, the lack of effect of badger culling on OTF-S and OTF-W herd bTB breakdowns<sup>12</sup> suggests that, in the hindsight of more developed understanding, the badger 'perturbation effect' hypothesis is simply an anomaly of the analysis chosen, from the range of available data at that time.

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## ANIMAL RIGHTS

### Ethical and legal issues around 'animal personhood'

IN his research comment 'Animal rights and the language of human rights',<sup>1</sup> professor of law and environmental justice, Angus Nurse, asks how the veterinary profession should respond to existing and future legal rights, and advocates the setting out of a legal framework for animal rights.

While domesticated animals have long been regarded as property and wild animals are in a different class, the categorical imperative of treating animals humanely has been a hallmark of civilised society for decades. But now there is a deeper understanding of animal sentience, which could be the basis for setting a legal framework for animal rights, especially through the sciences of cognitive ethology and neurochemistry.