NATIONAL FEDERATION OF BADGER GROUPS

Alternatives to snares

A review of alternative methods for controlling foxes and rabbits, and of the welfare and conservation concerns arising from their use

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2b Inworth Street, London SW11 3EP
Tel: 020 7228 6444 Fax: 020 7228 6555
Email: enquiries@nfbg.org.uk
Web: www.nfbg.org.uk

Registered Charity no. 1041772

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Contents

1. Executive Summary

This document has been produced as a supplement to the NFBG's report *The Case for a Ban on Snares*, and should be read in conjunction with that report. In this document, we make the following points:

The case for controlling foxes is often overstated, and it should not automatically be assumed that a ban on the use of snares would result in a great increase in fox predation on livestock or game, even if alternative methods of fox control (or fox damage control) did not exist.

Damage to agricultural and forestry interests by rabbits is considerable, and there is a legal requirement for landowners to control this species; however the law also provides for damage prevention as an alternative.

There are effective and humane ways of preventing or minimising predation by foxes and damage by rabbits, which should be used in preference to lethal control of these species.

If lethal control of foxes or rabbits is necessary, a wide range of alternative methods for controlling both species is available, and many of these are already in widespread use.

The effectiveness of the alternative methods of fox and rabbit control varies, and in some situations certain control methods are not practical. There are also animal welfare and wildlife conservation implications to be taken into account. There are a number of control methods to which the NFBG is opposed on animal welfare or conservation grounds. However in most circumstances there are effective methods of control for both foxes and rabbits, which are preferable to the use of snares from welfare and conservation points of view.

2. Introduction

In our report, *The Case for a Ban on Snares*, we present cogent arguments for the manufacture and use of all snares to be banned in Britain. We also consider the possible consequences of a ban on snares, and make the following points:

- Snares are considered by many gamekeepers to be essential to their efforts to control foxes. They are also used widely for the control of rabbits.
- There is a range of alternative legal methods for the control of both foxes and rabbits – all of which are already in use.
- The use of these alternative methods of control has implications for the welfare of foxes, rabbits and other, non-target animals.
- A review of the *need* for the control of foxes and rabbits is required. The perceived need for fox control is for the most part questionable, and while the control of rabbits is a legal requirement, the permissible alternative of damage prevention is often more effective.

The purpose of this document therefore is to:

- Briefly examine the true extent of the problems caused by foxes and rabbits, the primary target species of those who use snares, and the legal requirements for the control of these species, thereby establishing whether it is necessary to carry out control of foxes and rabbits to the extent that it is at present.
- Set out the alternatives to the lethal control of foxes and rabbits.
- List the alternative methods of fox and rabbit control which could be used if the use of snares were to be banned, and examine for each of these methods their effectiveness, practical considerations, and the implications for animal welfare and wildlife conservation.

We will examine these issues separately for each of these species, beginning with foxes, and then present our general conclusions.

Since this document was originally prepared in June 2002, DEFRA have announced a consultation on the use of snares. We have therefore reviewed and updated this document for presentation to the consultation.

3. Foxes

3.1 Introduction

The fox is widely regarded as a pest species, and many claims have been made regarding its destructiveness. Many of these claims are made by those who support foxhunting, which is rather ironic in view of the minimal contribution made by this activity towards the control of fox numbers. For those who wish to control foxes, there are many methods available besides snares. However, before we discuss these it is important to consider whether fox control is actually necessary.

3.2 Is fox control necessary?

Foxes are snared for two main reasons. Firstly they are alleged to be a threat to livestock (mainly lambs and poultry). Secondly they are seen as a threat to game birds in shooting areas. There is, however, considerable evidence to show that the problems caused by foxes are considerably overstated by those who argue for their destruction.

Despite the fact that foxes are frequently blamed for killing lambs, there is very little hard evidence to support such claims. It is more likely that foxes will take a bite out of a carcass, rather than kill a fit and living lamb. Research into fox predation carried out by Bristol University showed that only a very small percentage of lamb deaths in the UK could be attributed to foxes (McDonald, R., et al, 1997). This evidence was available to the Burns Inquiry, which concluded that although individual foxes may cause some damage, fox predation is not a significant cause of lamb mortality in the United Kingdom. Burns stated: “It is clear that only a small proportion of foxes kill lambs; otherwise, lamb losses would be much higher.” (Burns et al, 2000).

It is well documented that the majority of lamb deaths result from hypothermia or disease (McDonald, R., et al, 1997). It has therefore been argued that improving ewe nutrition, providing adequate shelter, and paying proper attention to weakly lambs would improve the survival of lambs far more effectively than killing foxes. (Stevens et al, 1981; Starr, 1981).

Foxes can kill poultry, but such predation can usually be prevented by housing birds securely so that foxes (and other predators) are denied access to them. A similar argument can be made regarding some game birds. In one submission to the Burns Inquiry, it was stated that if “If a fox got into one release pen on [a particular shoot in Exmoor] it could do up to £20,000 of damage, £20,000 being the cost of the pheasant poults in the pen” (Endangered Exmoor, 2000). However, if the pen were constructed securely, a fox would not gain access in the first place.

With regard to fox predation on grouse, the report “Countdown to the Ban” noted that: “A major long term study of grouse moor in Scotland, published in 2000, found that predation on grouse by foxes and raptors only became really significant if the grouse population on the moor was already in decline. There are many causes of falling grouse numbers, including habitat management failures, disease and weather.” (McKenna and Morrissey, 2001).

3.3 Fox control: alternatives to snares

3.3.1 Shooting

Effectiveness and practical considerations

Shooting is widely recognised as a very effective method of fox control which is already widely used. A survey carried out by the British Association of Shooting and Conservation (BASC) showed that although 86% of gamekeepers used snares, only 30% of the foxes killed by gamekeepers were actually taken with snares. The majority (57%) were killed by shooting. (BASC, 2000.)

Shooting may be undertaken at night from vehicles and using powerful spotlights or lamps to pick out the quarry (hence the term lamping). It can also be carried out by day, when typically foxes are ‘driven to guns’, that is, flushed from cover by beaters or dogs towards a line of people with shotguns. Night shooting is best

carried out where the terrain allows good views over long distances, and also the easy movement of the vehicles from which the guns are fired. It is therefore best suited to open countryside in lowland Britain, and is not practical in hilly areas, or areas where there is a lot of cover. Driving foxes to guns is more practical in these areas. Of course, in areas where the public has access, and close to towns and villages, the use of shotguns or high-powered rifles is not an option.

Welfare and conservation concerns

Theoretically, shooting should be the most efficient and humane way to kill an animal. Problems can arise, however, when shooting is conducted by people who are not fully trained, resulting in welfare problems for the quarry species and other, non-target animals, including badgers. The NFBG is aware of several incidents where badgers have been shot by lampers.

3.3.2 Hunting with hounds

Effectiveness and practical considerations

It is well established that hunting with hounds is not an effective means of controlling foxes. Indeed, a number of hunts are known to maintain coverts and artificial earths for the express purpose of encouraging foxes so that they can be hunted.

Welfare and conservation concerns

In foxhunting with hounds, the chase is deliberately prolonged by the use of dogs built for stamina rather than speed. As a consequence, hunted foxes endure unnecessary stress and physical exhaustion before they are killed. Furthermore, post mortem analyses of foxes killed by hounds have shown that death is not as quick as hunt supporters would like people to believe.

Other animals are also affected by hunting with hounds. There are numerous reports of domestic pets and livestock being savaged by hounds during fox hunts. Badgers suffer too as a result of foxhunting, as their setts are ‘stopped up’ before the hunts take place. The NFBG has received numerous reports of setts being blocked in contravention of the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 and to the detriment of the resident badgers. There have also been cases where foxes have been dug from active badger setts, by hunt terriermen. For these reasons, the NFBG is opposed to the hunting of foxes with hounds. (NFBG, 2002)

Hunting with hounds has been banned in Scotland. The future of this activity in England and Wales is one of the subjects of the Hunting Bill, which is currently being debated in parliament.

3.3.3 Digging with terriers

Effectiveness and practical considerations

Digging with terriers is carried out by hunt terriermen, some gamekeepers (the BASC survey previously referred to found that about 9% of foxes killed by gamekeepers were taken with the aid of terriers), and by others (who may or may not belong to working terrier clubs).

Welfare and conservation concerns

Digging for foxes with the aid of terriers can involve considerable cruelty to both fox and dogs, particularly when fighting takes place below ground.

What is more, legal terrier work often provides a cover for illegal badger digging. Many of those convicted for badger digging offences have been hunt terriermen, or members of working terrier clubs. Unfortunately, many others caught digging at well-known badger setts have escaped conviction by claiming in court that they were digging for foxes. For these reasons, the NFBG is opposed to the practice of digging with terriers. (NFBG, 2002.)

3.3.4 Lamping with dogs

Effectiveness and practical considerations

Lampers use powerful spotlights to pick out and dazzle their quarry in fields at night. Most lampers use guns to kill their quarry, but some use 'long dogs' or 'running dogs' – typically lurchers – instead. Lamping with dogs however tends to be carried out as an unauthorised (and therefore illegal) 'sport' rather than as legal fox control (GCT 2000).

Welfare and conservation concerns

There is little doubt that the animals hunted in this way suffer when they are set upon by the dogs. Furthermore, some lampers, particularly those operating without the permission of landowners, also take badgers. These badgers may be savaged by the dogs, beaten or stabbed by the lampers, or taken away for badger baiting. The NFBG is opposed to lamping with dogs as a form of 'pest' control.

3.3.5 Cage traps

Effectiveness and practical considerations

It is generally accepted that many foxes are too wary to enter cage traps, although in some circumstances (when set at poultry runs or release pens for example) the use of cage traps has met with a degree of success. However, an animal rescuer has advised the NFBG that she routinely catches foxes using cage traps (when called out to rescue sick or injured animals). A cage trap set to catch a fox needs to be covered (for example with a blanket or vegetation) so that it is dark inside. Additionally, if fox droppings are placed within the trap, this will encourage foxes (which are naturally inquisitive and also territorial) to enter the trap.

Welfare and conservation concerns

Animals held alive in cage traps will experience stress and may injure themselves in their attempts to escape. However, compared with other forms of fox control cage traps are relatively humane. Regular inspection of traps, release of non-target species, and the quick and humane despatch of the target animals will minimise any welfare and conservation concerns.

3.3.6 Leg cuffs

In 1997, the Krebs Report into badgers and bovine TB recommended that snares should be used to capture badgers as part of a culling trial (ISG, 1997). The NFBG objected to this proposal on the grounds that the use of snares would result in unnecessary suffering (NFBG, 1998) and the Government's Independent Scientific Group (ISG) subsequently recommended that snares should not be used. The ISG did however recommend that research into the welfare implications of snares should be carried out, along with research into alternatives to snares, particularly leg cuffs (ISG, 1998).

MAFF therefore commissioned, as part of its programme of short-term projects for 1998-99, research into the use of leg cuffs. It chose a design recommended by the Animal Welfare Institute of North America, a 2cm wide padded cuff made from a strong but supple band of synthetic fibre. It was proposed that this cuff would first be tested on a small number of badgers (two to four) which would kept under continuous video surveillance in specially designed pens. Then the cuffs would be used on a larger number of badgers under field conditions. If at any stage badgers were injured, the research would be abandoned (MAFF, 1999b).

This research was not completed and DEFRA has stated that any findings will not be published. However, we understand that the Home Office is funding a new trial of the 'Rose fox cuff', designed by the late Quentin Rose. The trial commenced in September 2003 and is being carried out jointly by the Game Conservancy Trust and DEFRA (Game Conservancy Trust, 2002; George Rose, pers com).

4. Rabbits

4.1 Introduction

The situation regarding the control of rabbits is different to that of foxes in a number of ways. One important difference is that rabbits are acknowledged to be a serious problem for agriculture in Britain. For example, it

is estimated the value of agricultural damage caused by rabbits every year is around £40 million (DEFRA, 2001). Rabbits can also cause considerable damage to young trees.

Another difference is that landowners and occupiers have legal obligations regarding the control of rabbits on their land under the Pests Act 1954. An Order made under Section 1 of that Act makes virtually the whole of England and Wales a Rabbit Clearance Area. This obliges landowners and occupiers to destroy rabbits on their land or to prevent them from causing damage elsewhere.

As with foxes, there are a number of alternatives to snares as a means of controlling rabbits. There are also ways in which rabbit damage can be prevented, reducing the need for controlling the rabbits themselves.

4.2 Preventing rabbit damage

Damage to crops and trees by rabbits can be prevented by erecting rabbit-proof fencing. This takes two forms: permanent wire netting, or temporary electric fencing. With regard to wire netting fences, DEFRA advises that "in many situations, fencing can be a more cost effective damage prevention measure than control methods that have to be undertaken year after year" (DEFRA, 2001). Electric fencing can be just as effective, and has the advantages of portability and lower purchase and erection costs. However, maintenance costs are higher than for wire netting.

Individual trees can also be protected from rabbit damage by tree guards.

4.3 Rabbit control: Alternatives to snares

4.3.1 Gassing

Effectiveness and practical considerations

The gassing (or fumigation) of rabbit warrens as a method of controlling rabbits has been rated as 90% effective by researchers at the Central Science Laboratory (Dendy et al 2000). According to DEFRA, gassing can reduce the rabbit population by up to 80% (DEFRA, 2001). However, other methods may be considered preferable for various reasons, not least of which is the fact that the use of gas can be hazardous and must be carried out under licence, with specialist equipment and considerable care.

Welfare and conservation concerns

Although it is legal to use gas for the destruction of rabbits, the gassing of foxes or badgers is illegal due to welfare concerns. However, if gassing is carried out by people who do not know the differences between rabbit burrows, fox earths and badger setts, there is always the risk that badgers or foxes may be gassed along with rabbits, especially as badger setts and fox earths are often co-located with rabbit warrens. For example in April 2001 at Aldershot Magistrates Court, Rentokil pleaded guilty to poisoning a badger. Rentokil employees employed to remove rabbits from land near Aldershot were not aware of the difference between badger and rabbit burrows, and had placed poison in a number of badger sett entrances.

4.3.2 Shooting

Effectiveness and practical considerations

Shooting is one of the least effective means of rabbit control, given a rating of just 30% by researchers at the Central Science Laboratory (Dendy et al 2000). Shooting is also inappropriate in areas close to habitation, or other areas where there is public access.

Welfare and conservation concerns

These are similar to the concerns raised regarding the shooting of foxes, and include the difficulty of making a clean kill, especially when shooting at night.

4.3.3 Live trapping

Effectiveness and practical considerations

Live traps come in two forms. Cage traps are positioned above ground and are baited with food; they may catch one or several rabbits depending on the design. Drop box traps are used in conjunction with wire netting; a tunnel from the netting leads into the box which is buried in the ground. Rabbits fall into the box and cannot escape. Live traps are a fairly labour-intensive and costly method of controlling rabbits, but box traps in particular can be very effective and recoup their costs over a period of time. One user suffering from a high infestation of rabbits reported an initial average capture rate from 50 box traps of around 500 rabbits per week, with a peak of 870. The use of cage trapping as a method of controlling rabbits has been rated as 60% effective by researchers at the Central Science Laboratory, while the use of box traps was rated provisionally as 80% effective (Dendy et al 2000).

Welfare and conservation concerns

The risk of physical suffering by animals caught in live traps is minimal, although stress may be experienced. Regular inspection, the release of non-target animals and the humane despatch of the target species should preclude any major welfare or conservation concerns.

4.3.4 Spring traps

Effectiveness and practical considerations

The use of spring traps is governed by the Pests Act 1954, the Spring Traps (Approval) Order 1995 (the Spring Traps (Scotland) (Approval) Order 1996 in Scotland), and the Protection of Animals Act 1911 (the Protection of Animals (Scotland) Act 1912 in Scotland). They may be placed only in the entrances of rabbit burrows, or in accordance with the provisions of the Spring Traps Approval Orders. We have found very little information regarding the effectiveness of spring traps as a means of rabbit control.

Welfare and conservation concerns

These traps are said to kill rabbits quickly and humanely. However, like snares, they can be indiscriminate in that they can catch other animals besides rabbits. Guidance produced by one supplier of spring traps states that these traps should not be used where red squirrels or polecats (Wildlife and Countryside Act Schedule 6 species) are present. However, the polecat has expanded its range from Wales to many parts of central England, and through reintroductions is also present in parts of southern England and Scotland. Polecats prey mainly on rabbits and spend a large proportion of their time in and around rabbit warrens. Therefore the areas where the use of spring traps will put polecats at risk, are increasing all the time.

4.3.5 Ferreting

Effectiveness and practical considerations

DEFRA does not consider the use of ferreting alone to be an effective means of controlling rabbits (DEFRA, 2001). Researchers at the Central Science Laboratory rated the effectiveness of this form of rabbit control at only 35% (Dendy et al 2000).

Welfare and conservation concerns

Ferrets are used to bolt rabbits from their burrows into nets. There is no doubt that the rabbits will experience the same stress that they would if hunted by a wild predator. However provided that they are quickly and humanely despatched once caught, welfare considerations would appear to be minimal.

5. Conclusions

Although snares are widely used in order to control foxes, the amount of damage caused by foxes, by way of predation on livestock and game birds, is small both in absolute terms, and in comparison with losses caused by other factors. It should not therefore be assumed that a ban on the use of snares would automatically result in a great increase in fox predation on livestock or game, even if there were no alternative methods for controlling foxes or preventing the damage they can cause.

Damage to agricultural and forestry interests by rabbits on the other hand is clearly considerable. The law recognises this by imposing on landowners a requirement to control rabbits on their land, or alternatively to prevent rabbits on their land from causing damage elsewhere.

Where genuine problems with fox predation or rabbit damage exist, it is often possible to prevent these problems by means other than killing the animals which cause them. These solutions often appear to be more time consuming and costly than direct control of foxes and rabbits. However in the longer term, given that control of foxes and rabbits has to be carried out on a continual basis as populations replenish themselves, the erection of fox- or rabbit-proof fencing to prevent predation and damage can be (and often is) more cost effective.

If, for whatever reason, managers of livestock, game, crops or trees wish to control foxes and rabbits rather than the predation or damage caused by them, many alternatives to the use of snares exist. These methods vary in their effectiveness, and also in their suitability for the various situations in which people wish to carry out fox or rabbit control.

There are also implications for animal welfare and wildlife conservation which need to be taken into account when considering these alternative methods of fox and rabbit control. The NFBG opposes hunting with dogs, including foxhunting with hounds and the use of terriers below ground, because of the adverse effects of these practices on the welfare and conservation of badgers and other animals. The use of gas or spring traps against rabbits (neither are legal against foxes) can lead to the death of non-target species including badgers and potentially polecats. We also have concerns about shooting as a means of fox and rabbit control. A requirement for hunters to pass proficiency tests before they are allowed to hunt wildlife with guns, which is mandatory in a number of other countries, would go some way towards meeting our concerns in this area. The use of live traps however (including box traps for rabbits) would appear to offer opportunities for effective (if labour intensive) control of foxes and rabbits, with minimal welfare problems (providing that they are checked frequently so that the animals caught in them can be humanely despatched or, in the case of non-target species, released).

In conclusion, legal and effective alternatives to the use of snares clearly exist. There are a number of methods for directly controlling both foxes and rabbits which, if carried out properly, are more humane and less indiscriminate than snares. We would however argue that the control of fox predation and rabbit damage, rather than the control of foxes and rabbits themselves, is preferable and often more effective.

Steve Jackson (Chairman) and Elaine King (Chief Executive)
National Federation of Badger Groups
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