

The Terran badger: Telling the right story

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This paper offers an alternative to the anthropocentric and moralizing conceptualizations of badgers as villains, vectors, vermin or victims. Rather than arguing that these mustelids threaten dairy farms, hedgehogs and songbirds, or claiming that innocent badgers are instead wise and generous, the paper contends that badgers should be valued simply for being badgers. These mammals increase the biodiversity of their locale and demonstrate a way of being that is deeply entangled in the life of the land upon which they live. Their bodies carry the evidence of polluted earth, while their habits offer testimony of the relative health of an ecosystem. This paper suggests that thinking with badgers can help us to conceive of ecocentric ways of being in the land.

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Ecocentrism would ask that we respect a fellow animal not for services rendered to humanity, nor for living up to some humanistic ideal of pacifism, generosity or altruism, but simply for who they are. In particular, what would it be to respect in such a way the much persecuted – and, occasionally, sanctified – badger?

European badgers (*Meles meles*) are mustelids, members of the weasel family. They inhabit the soil and largely depend upon it for their sustenance (given their diet is largely comprised of earthworms), to the extent that their behaviour and their bodies are intimately responsive to the ecological health or disease of the land. Though omnivores, badgers are the UK's largest remaining member of the order Carnivora. In the absence of potentially threatening predators, most British badgers seem to form larger communities and spend more time socializing outside their setts than do their conspecifics on the continent.

Badgers may have outlasted wolves and bears in the UK, but they have still suffered intense human persecution. They have been hunted with dogs, dug out of their setts, snared, poisoned, shot, beaten to death and made to fight for entertainment. Their setts have been destroyed or blocked. The extent of cruelty was such that they have been granted considerable legal protection. It is illegal to disturb the setts, hunt badgers with dogs or kill them – unless you have a licence. Nonetheless, many are still illegally killed, setts continue to be disturbed and an estimated 50,000 a year die on the UK's roads (Fahrig and Rytwinski, 2009).

In addition, licensed intensive badger culling in England has killed nearly 250,000 badgers since it began in 2013. This mass slaughter is justified with the claim that badgers are a vector for bovine tuberculosis (bTB), which, if found in cattle, leads to their slaughter, to prevent further infection within the cow and possibly human community. There is much that is questionable in the reasoning (*cf.* Badger Trust, 2024). It assumes that dairy production must continue in its present (intensive, industrialized) form and that that industry is threatened by badgers. Ecocentrists and animal rights advocates would strongly contest the first assumption, while the majority of scientific opinion counters the second. Only a tiny proportion of badgers are infected at any one time, while 94 per cent of bTB transmission arises from cow-to-cow infection. Thus, so long as intensive dairy farming continues, then so will bTB – even if *all* of England's badgers were to be slaughtered. Improved hygiene and biosecurity on farms would be far more beneficial to the industry than badger culling (McGill *et al.*, 2020; Langton *et al.*, 2022). A more accurate reading of the situation is that bTB is yet another means by which industrialized animal agriculture is harming wildlife (Justus *et al.*, 2024).

Stories and slaughter

Whatever the explanatory narrative, there is something extremely unpalatable about attempting to justify the suffering of others. In considering the analogous case of the mass culling of flying foxes in Australia, Rose (2022: 48) writes, “[t]here are those who respond, saying ‘yes’ to the calls of others who suffer; there are those who simply turn away; and there are those who actually side with death”.

Those who side with death justify the pain to badgers in part through what Cassidy (2019) calls ‘Bad Badger’ narratives. Bad Badgers spread diseases; they also eat or damage crops, predate the nests of songbirds and kill hedgehogs. Bad Badgers – like Tommy Brock in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Mr Tod* – are disagreeable creatures who gobble up baby bunnies and deserve no compassion, for they show none. Those opposed to the badger cull might favour instead a ‘Good Badger’ narrative, aligned more with Mr Badger in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, who is wise, reclusive and generally kindly.

Both of these conceptions seek to view badgers through an anthropocentric, moralizing lens. I suggest an alternative: the *Terran Badger* – neither demonized nor eulogized, but instead an animal entangled in a dynamic web of ecological processes.

The Terran badger

Badgers live in in the earth, in setts – large burrows, dug out decades or even centuries previously by their ancestors, which may reach as deep as four metres below the surface. Current residents enlarge and reorganize, such that a single established sett may have many entrances, as well as both satellite and outlier setts associated with it. Although badgers tend to be very settled (they may be born in one chamber and later die, to be entombed by their fellows, just along the passage), they might move among these locations to reduce a pest burden, for a peaceful nursery or because of relational incompatibility with other residents. Sett ‘boundaries’ are porous rather than strictly enforced territories, with a good proportion of cubs fathered by males who are not residents of the same sett (MacDonald and Newman, 2022). Setts may also be abandoned and then later reinhabited.

Badgers, who regulate breeding according to the resources and population size of their locale (Sugianto *et al.*, 2021), are exquisitely attuned to the state of the soil upon and within which they live. Their patterns of foraging demonstrate the relative health of the land. For example, if a sett has a small regular foraging area, such that the badgers travel only a short distance each night, this indicates that this area has good soil, relatively free of industrial fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides; worm-rich organic pasture supports more badgers. In contrast, badgers on high-intensity arable land must range much further (personal communication with Peter Edwards, Northamptonshire Badger Trust).

As they are loyal to their setts, so they are faithful to their tracks, which mark the countryside like visible veins, used by generation after generation of badgers, and followed even when their traditional route has been ploughed up or intersected by a road. In following these tracks, and deepening the path as they go, badgers are both replicating the actions of their ancestors and “inscribing their own identities into the land as they go” (Ingold, 2021: 54). Junctions on the tracks tend to be marked by ‘latrines’ (holes in which they defecate). These were thought to be territorial markers, but that view has been superseded by the understanding that latrines are more akin to village noticeboards. With their supreme olfactory capacity, they can sense precisely who else has passed by, what they have eaten, how healthy they are and, if a female, whether they are in oestrus. The latrines are also interesting from a ‘Terran’ perspective: the land bears the scent of local badgers, as the local badgers, holed up during daylight hours in the earth, bear the scent of the local terroir. Despret (2021) argues that this transfer of scent between land and animal suggests a profound intimacy: they belong to the land as much as it belongs to them.

Nevertheless, it is not the case that badgers simply make use of the place as they find it. Despite all the recent focus on the reintroduction of beavers and boars into the UK, justified by their role as ecosystem engineers, there is an extant native ecosystem engineer whose contributions are seldom, if ever, acknowledged. This suggests, perhaps, that there is an inclination to value an animal instrumentally only so far as that animal has been introduced,

reintroduced or rescued by humans, while resident animals who get on with impacting their habitat in ways that benefit a non-human community (invertebrates, ground flora etc.) are not granted the same accolades. Through their digging, feeding, defecating and travelling, badgers influence their environment. They change the soil pH, increase biodiversity around their setts, disperse seeds and offer homes for other non-humans, sharing their setts with foxes, rabbits and a variety of invertebrates (Kurek *et al.*, 2022).

An anthropocentric view might see this as pure and admirable generosity, but badgers will evict foxes for their own reasons and will make use of baby rabbits as a conveniently situated food source. In addition, they will eat songbird eggs and hedgehogs. However, to regard any of this as some cause for critique is not just inappropriate anthropomorphism but a weak attempt at sleight of hand: the decline in songbird numbers and the increasing precarity of hedgehogs are not related to their millennia of co-existence with badgers but to the damaging effects of industrialized agriculture, pollution, the climate crisis, habitat destruction and the other insults to the land caused by humans.

As badgers root through the earth for worms, they consume the very soil that has received the decomposed nutrients of their ancestors; but all too often in the UK they also accumulate the toxic residues of human industry (Bukovjan *et al.*, 2014; Mullineaux *et al.*, 2021; Sartorius *et al.*, 2023) and potentially become infected with bTB, either from faeces directly passed from pasture-living cows or through the slurry sprayed on land as a fertilizer. Thus, badgers both shape and are shaped by place. To use the phrase of Coccia (2019: 66), we could say that badgers are in a state of “transcendental immersion”, meaning that they are in the land with the same intensity and same force as the land is within them. They are true natives, whose identity has been shaped by the place to which they belong (Mathews, 2005: 58).

The Terran human

In many human origin stories, the human animal was formed of clay. Like plants, we rose from the chthonic darkness. Like all life, it is to that which we will return. As fellow earthy, earthly, embodied Terrans, we share with badgers the narrow living film of soil that sheathes our planet. This close connection to the land, forgotten by many of us in Western societies, is a familiar theme in Indigenous philosophies. I do not wish to colonize concepts or breezily suggest that badgers share their way-of-being with Indigenous peoples. Rather I am making an analogical point: some humans still do, and most humans surely did, experience life as entangled with non-human others and profoundly influenced by and dependent upon the land itself.

Consider the words of Big Bill Neidjie – an elder of the Gaagudju people of Australia’s Northern Territory – that “You got to hang onto this story because the earth, this ground, *earth where you brought up*, this earth he grow you”. As Val Plumwood glosses this remark, it reflects a view in which that earth where you brought up is “an active agent in and co-constituter of our lives” (both quoted in Rose, 2013: 106). That is, place is not passive, it is active. For one thing, it lays demands, obligations and responsibilities upon its inhabitants.

For badgers, place determines how far they roam and how many cubs are born and raised in a given year, for example. As for humans, one of the demands it lays on *Homo sapiens* is, according to another Australian Aboriginal thinker, Margaret Kemarre Turner, to experience place as *storied*:

If you're seeing the Land without the Story, then there's nothing there. We see our country, even though it might be destroyed by another species, we see how the beautiness is still in the country. [...] It doesn't matter that horses and bullocks have caused such destruction, we still see the spirit of the Land glistening (quoted in Rose et al., 2017: 30).

The modern British landscape does not always glisten. Indeed, the UK is recognized as one of the world's most nature-depleted nations (Burns *et al.*, 2023). It is not just the impact of industrial agriculture and development, it is also the fractured connections between people and place. This country has “a cosmologically dispossessed culture, a culture clinging to a bankrupt worldview which prescribes a cramped materialistic individualism, the consequences of which we are presently reaping” (Mathews, 2006: 31).

Terran Badgers are also reaping the consequences of this bankrupt worldview as they accumulate carcinogenic heavy metals in their bodies; as they are slaughtered without rational cause; as they face automotive-death when they cross the road-fragmented landscape to source enough food in depleted earth; as they struggle to deal with the loss of a century-old sett on land deemed suitable for 'development'. Their very bodies show some of what is wrong in our relationship with our fellow earth-beings, while the ongoing persecution demonstrates our failure to appreciate the earth that grew us.

Terran Badgers also, however, demonstrate an alternative ontology which, while morally neutral, is illustrative of some ideas supporting a more meaningful relationship with our surroundings as well as with our human and more-than-human community. As they increase the biodiversity around their setts, so humans could desist from the chemical warfare that turns agricultural land into wildlife deserts. As badgers share their setts with diverse others, so humans could resist exterminating any wild creature or plant who appears in their space. As badgers inhabit nested communities, with porous boundaries, so humans could live with both greater communal connections and more harmonious interconnections. As they belong to the land as much as the land belongs to them, so too, perhaps, could we.

The Terran Badger story affirms both the badgers' and the land's beautiness.

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