ISG 765

INTERFERENCE WITH TRAPPING - A RESPONSE TO ISG 748

At its June meeting the Group considered a paper (ISG 748) prepared by the National Trial Manager which described interference experienced in relation to recent trapping operations. Dr Woodroffe has prepared a paper commenting on two possible changes to procedures suggested in ISG 748, namely, abandoning pre-baiting and point baiting. The Group will wish to consider Dr Woodroffe's paper before deciding its advice.

Secretariat

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INTERFERENCE WITH TRAPPING - A RESPONSE TO ISG 748

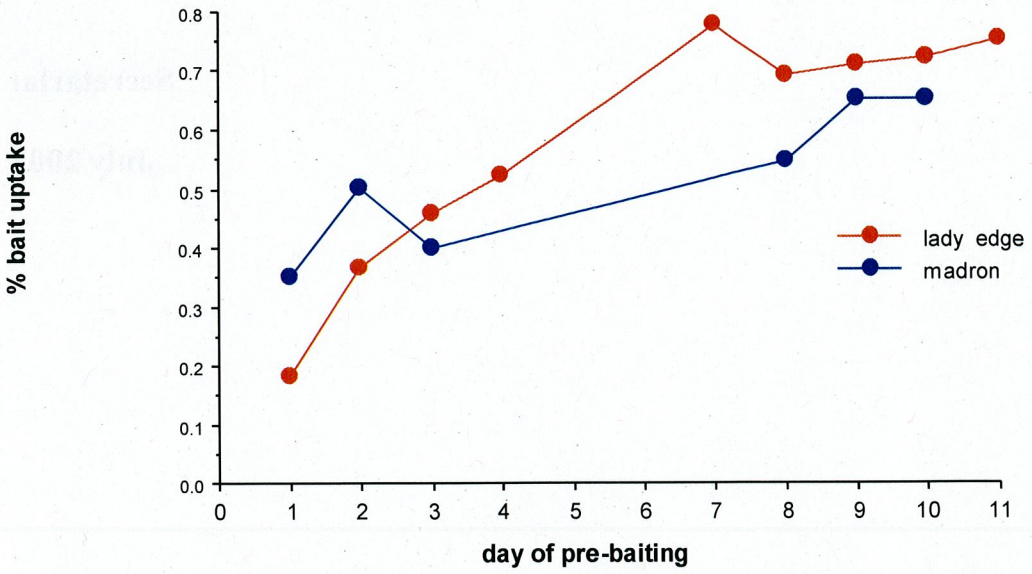
The paper ISG 748 presents data on the number of traps stolen, destroyed or interfered with in the course of trapping operations. Such interference can severely impede trapping operations within particular localities, and also adds substantial costs. Since interference increases throughout the course of a trapping operation, the National Trial Manager suggests that

(i) operations might be shortened by abandoning pre-baiting

(ii) pre-baiting outside traps (point baiting), deploying traps only just before setting them to catch.

(i) Abandoning pre-baiting

Pre-baiting is built into the trapping SOP because it greatly increases the rate at which badgers can be captured. An analysis of badgers' trappability within long-term studies showed lower trappability (of cubs in particular) in Wytham, where no pre-baiting was carried out at the time of the study, relative to Woodchester and Nibley where trapping was always preceded by pre-baiting.



Data from the trial suggest that abandoning pre-baiting would greatly reduce the capture success; the graph above shows how bait uptakes at Madron and Lady Edge changed over time. Bait uptakes on the first day of pre-baiting were 54% (Madron) and 24% (Lady Edge) of those on the last day. It is difficult to translate these bait uptakes into projected capture success, because individual badgers probably visited multiple traps during pre-baiting (the numbers of badgers captured were 48% (Madron) and 51% (Lady Edge) of the total bait uptakes on the last day of pre-baiting). Nevertheless, it seems likely that bait

uptake is correlated with capture success. If this is the case, then abandoning pre-baiting could be expected to lead to a substantial reduction in trapping success.

A reduction in daily trapping success could have two outcomes. First, it might simply mean that fewer badgers are caught in total. This would compromise two aims of the trial; to investigate the proportion of cattle TB incidents that can be prevented by badger culling, and to acquire a meaningful sample of the local badger population for epidemiological studies. Alternatively, reduced capture success might mean that trapping operations took longer to achieve the same level of removal. This would negate the advantage of abandoning pre-baiting - to shorten the timespan of the operations. In addition, it would provide much poorer data on the spatial distribution of TB in badger social groups because slow removal could lead to immigration within the course of trapping operations.

ISG 748 draws attention to the fact that a reduced capture success could lead to a more even distribution of laboratory submissions, by eliminating the peak at the start of trapping operations. However, this would probably come at a cost of lower overall trapping success and potentially longer operations.

(ii) Point baiting

Point baiting is currently used where interference with trapping is particularly severe. While there are no data comparing capture success under point baiting and cage pre-baiting, it seems likely that the former is inferior; many animals are neophobic about cages as well as about novel foods, and 'persuading' badgers to enter traps is a major aim of pre-baiting.

Thus, widespread point baiting would probably lead to lower overall capture success, with the effects described above. In short, point baiting is currently adopted as a 'necessary evil' where needed; adopting this as standard procedure would reduce capture success unnecessarily.

Concluding remarks

I appreciate the implications of interference with regard to staff morale, police time and cost to DEFRA, and accept the need to consider approaches that might limit these impacts. However, we must also be mindful of the costs associated with reduced trapping efficiency. My own opinion is that this would undermine the aims of the trial, and would open DEFRA to criticism (bearing in mind that inadequate removal was perceived to be a major shortcoming of the interim strategy).

[redacted]
Mpala Research Centre
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