Being a badger’s advocate

Glen Cousquer qualified from the University of Edinburgh in 1997 and completed his Certificate in Zoological Medicine in 2003. He has since worked in exotic and small animal emergency practice in France and the UK. He holds masters degrees in Outdoor Education and Educational Research and is an International Mountain Leader. He is currently an ESRC Scholar at the Institute of Geography, at the University of Edinburgh.

This series gives readers the opportunity to consider and contribute to discussion of some of the ethical dilemmas that can arise in veterinary practice. Each month, a case scenario is presented, followed by discussion of some of the issues involved. In addition, a possible way forward is suggested; however, there is rarely a cut-and-dried answer in such cases, and readers may wish to suggest an alternative approach. This month’s dilemma, ‘Being a badger’s advocate’, is presented and discussed by Glen Cousquer. Readers with comments to contribute are invited to send them as soon as possible, so that they can be considered for publication in the next issue. Discussion of the dilemma ‘Anaesthetic death: who pays?’, which was published in the May issue of In Practice, appears on page 351.

The series is being coordinated by Siobhan Mullan, of the University of Bristol. It is hoped it will provide a framework that will help practices find solutions when facing similar dilemmas.

In preparing for any public debate, we need to think about who we must look in the eye, whose gaze we will have to hold from across the table. The public space is a forum in which we come together to discuss difficult issues; this requires us to know, understand and respect the other. Each individual is invited and afforded the power to speak, or at least the power of representation.

However, this is not a court of law because animals cannot be held accountable. Neither is it a parliamento of animals, since non-human animals are excluded (Hinchcliffe and others 2005). Granted, the voice of those humans who value badgers are often heard, but the badger – the individual badger – is never in the room.

To ensure every voice is heard, the badger must be granted agency. The advocate, agent or representative will need to consider what that badger wants and this requires us to recognise that, while no one has denied animals the capacity to track or trace themselves, or retrace a path, they have been ‘refused the power to transform those traces into verbal language’ (Derrida 2008). Tracks and traces can here be understood as the clear signs of an animal’s intentions; animals are unable, however, to speak in the first person. But why should this prevent us from interpreting their traces, understanding their wishes and treating them as subjects rather than objects?

As the badger’s advocate, you will need to go down to the cell (or set) to meet your client, to look him in the eye and explain that his fate is being debated because he is believed to be responsible for the spread of a bacillus. You will need to know him, if you are to present him and represent him (Bourdieu 1992).

Others contributing to the debate may level an objection at this point, citing ‘unjustified anthropomorphism’, but they would have to first respond to the counter-objection of ‘unjustified anthropocentrism’. Anthropocentric world views marginalise the non-human animal and justify a ‘responsible anthropomorphism’ that uses concepts commonly deployed by human geographers when considering minority or outsider human groups (Johnston 2008).

Possible way forward

As the badger’s representative you will need to speak on his behalf and ensure that his voice is heard and that he is not written out of the debate. Would it be enough to present ‘Mr Brock’, a gentleman of mixed descent (black and white) whose ancestors have always lived...
in these islands, a respected member of the woodland community, known to be very sociable and hard working? No, this will not do, for how can a badger then be heard and contribute to the debate? The badger will not be inclined to attend the meeting, despite your attempts to persuade him to do so! And he certainly will be at a complete loss as to why his extermination is proposed. Immigrants arriving in New York were not after all, put to sleep if their chest radiographs showed them to be carrying tuberculosis. Indeed not, their humanity was respected! What is it that makes killing so much easier to undertake than fencing, behavioural modification or a vaccination programme?

Recognising your own limited ability to interpret the badger’s traces and explode the many assumptions that underpin an anthropocentric world view, you realise that, fundamentally, this badger is an individual, not just one of a species about which we permit ourselves to generalise. Therefore, we can see that the language being used (the accused, the pest, the badger) is a distancing tool that gets in the way of seeing the individual. In placing this badger in the room, I am asking you to look this individual in the eyes and know whose fate you are debating. We need to be aware of, and guard against, distancing.

Now to really know the other, we visit them at home, and I know that this badger will readily receive you in his woodland home, provided that you are quiet and discrete, visit in small numbers, are patient and respect his needs and habits. This much his traces do tell.

References

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Any comments?
Readers with views to contribute on ‘An objective contribution to a public debate on bovine TB and the badger cull’ should e-mail them to inpractice@bva-edit.co.uk so that they can be considered for publication in the next issue. The deadline for receipt of comments is Friday, June 28. Please limit contributions to 200 words.