

The Effect of Foot and Mouth on Zoos in the UK

Stephen McKeown, Regional Editor 24 April 2001

Since the first case of Foot and Mouth disease (FMD) was confirmed in the UK on 20th February, there have been 1448 outbreaks (at 26th April). While the effect on the agricultural industry is very much in the public eye with the now familiar footage of funeral pyres of sheep and cattle burned into all our minds, the implications of the epidemic for zoos in the UK is less well-reported.

The hysteria whipped up by the media both here and abroad is reminiscent of that which filled the news in the weeks following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Now, as then, we are fed a diet of rumour instead of confirmed fact, where the misery of people personally affected is exploited for all the wrong reasons.

The newspapers reported today that the Government is actively considering using napalm to speed up the burning of infected carcasses but the sensationalist spin put on this by the less sophisticated papers serves only to spread disquiet and cloud people's objectivity.

We are told one week by the press that bushmeat imported from Asia for use in Chinese restaurants brought the virus into the country. Subsequently, Chinese restaurants were boycotted in many cities and livelihoods put at risk because of this unsubstantiated gossip.

Other theories discussed in the media are: an infected antelope imported from South Africa for a wildlife park; a test tube of the virus stolen from a UK Government research facility; leftover food from schools being fed to pigs and so the list goes on... The truth is that we will never know and time and money spent on speculation would be better applied to exploring the swiftest and most effective means of eradicating the virus as quickly as possible.

Within a few days of the virus beginning to spread across the country, zoos started closing their gates to the public and allowed in essential staff only. This was, in some ways, a difficult decision to make as zoos here get no financial support from the government and consequently rely almost entirely on income from visitors to survive. In the absence of visitor income, the coffers soon began to drain as zoos continued forking out for animal food bills, veterinary fees, staff wages etc. In one UK Zoo, the staff agreed to a 50% cut in wages and in many others very stringent economy measures have had to be taken, including lay-offs of staff.

Should any zoo animal become infected, MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) policy is that the animals should be culled and then disposed of by either burning or rendering down. The vision this presents is not a palatable one. Susceptible species include all hoofstock, elephants and, it is thought, certain rodents such as porcupines and capybara. Other species such as hedgehogs and rats can act as carriers of the disease, as can human beings.

Vaccination is not readily accepted in the zoo (or farming) community as the solution to the crisis though at least it is there as an option for endangered species. No one is clear on the restrictions this would place on subsequent movement of vaccinated animals. One can only imagine the disruption such restrictions might cause to co-ordinated breeding programs built up over many years.

The UK Zoo Federation has been active in speaking to representatives of the government both in terms of how to best protect zoo animals from the disease, the pros and cons of vaccination and of what compensation measures might be implemented in cases of serious commercial damage. One suggestion is that the government might give retrospective VAT (a kind of sales tax levied on zoo entrance fees) relief to zoos badly affected by loss of revenue but no official reaction has been given to this as yet..



The Deputy Prime Minister did a press call at Chester Zoo in March to reassure the public and foreign tourists that many wildlife and leisure attractions are open and perfectly safe to visit. Chester Zoo's Director, Professor Gordon McGregor Reid, had a meeting with the DPM to brief him on the difficulties facing zoos and to

suggest some solutions.

Although many zoos are now open again with strict procedures in place to lower the risk of infection, trading is up to 50% below normal levels in some cases, owing to the continued reluctance of the public to visit the countryside or wildlife attractions. This translates into huge financial losses and clearly will impact for some time on the conservation work done by zoos in this country.



Unfortunately, there continues to be widespread ignorance about the disease both at home and overseas. Some would-be tourists have spoken on television about not wanting to come to the UK in case they catch BSE (mad cow disease) and FMD. Indeed, a friend of mine who works for British Airways had a fully-wrapped and sealed chocolate Easter egg confiscated at JFK airport in New York! Hopefully the media can use its influence in a more positive way than described above to reassure tourists and the public that, as the Prime Minister puts it, 'Britain is open for business' and that includes our zoos too!

There was a cartoon in a German newspaper a few weeks ago featuring the French fleet and Spanish Armada sinking in the English Channel but a galleon full of FMD virus sailing unresisted toward our shores. This suggestion of a nation helpless under siege and cloaked in smoke from the pyres is not accurate. .



Although the effects of the disease have been devastating and we may continue to suffer after-shocks for some time to come, the general mood in the zoo community here is that we got through a

Foot and Mouth epidemic in 1967 when less was known about the virus and veterinary techniques were less sophisticated. There is certainly no reason why we shouldn't get through it again. Hopefully, by the time you read this, the epidemic will be on the decline and under control and we can all start getting back to normal again.

