

The latest evidence for and against e-collars

Dog trainer **Jamie Penrith** looks at the facts.

Following intense lobbying from animal rights charities, Michael Gove announced four years ago that Defra would ban “cruel and barbaric” handheld electronic training collars (e-collars) for dogs.

Almost overnight, the department reversed its position on the findings of its £½ million research into e-collar use. The research, which had been deemed to show ‘insufficient evidence’ for a ban, suddenly and without explanation became ‘robust scientific evidence’, and only an outright ban would satisfy the alleged ‘change in public attitude’.

Defra scrambled together a public consultation, the results of which unexpectedly demonstrated widespread opposition to its proposal, with a 64%

majority of respondents and a further 540 email submissions rejecting calls for a ban. Only 36% and 88 emails supported it. This was awkward for Defra, which had clearly misjudged public opinion.

Defra knew then and knows now that the British Veterinary Association holds no evidence of harm caused by e-collars. The Kennel Club (which was instrumental in the lobbying efforts) stated in writing that it, too, had ‘no evidence of intentional or unintentional misuse’ of e-collars. Nor had the police – nor the RSPCA – ever issued a written warning, or secured a conviction for any e-collar cruelty in the UK.

Undeterred by lack of public support and zero evidence of harm (which would be justified cause to act) however, Defra

insisted that the hypothetical threat posed by e-collars was a real animal welfare issue. With Boris Johnson comparing e-collar use to “caning a child”, civil servants set about defending such claims.

Judicial review

The Electronic Collar Manufacturers’ Association (an e-collar trade body dedicated to ensuring quality product standards) secured a judicial review regarding the legality of the consultation process. During proceedings, when asked about the justification for Defra’s sudden U-turn regarding the threat posed by e-collars, the department informed the court that the Animal Welfare Act (2006) affords a minister ‘the right to change their mind’.

This alone should be just cause for concern for anyone who trains or works ‘driven’ dogs to perform safely, effectively and efficiently under demanding situations, because the animal rights lobby may not stop at e-collars – the same groups calling for a ban are keen to see the UK adopt the existing Dutch legal pet-keeping model, which states: “The use of slip chains [including slip leads] in ‘parenting’ courses is now obsolete.”

In 2021, the Appeals Court found that Defra’s conduct was technically lawful.

Better trained?

In response to letters from dog owners, trainers and professionals who use e-collars humanely and responsibly to prevent dogs attacking other animals, correspondence from Defra officials instructs them to follow the “most proven method” of relying on leads when knowingly exercising dogs near livestock. Defra states that ‘stock-proofing dogs’ or solidifying recall under high temptation using e-collars is unjustifiable. The owners of determined, prey-driven dogs should instead seek the help of trainers who use only positive ‘reward training’.

Thus, Government officials began referring dog owners to trainers they have never met, whose correction-free training Defra believes offers superior results compared with training involving corrective guidance.

E-collars play a vital role in training problem dogs from attacking livestock and wild animals.

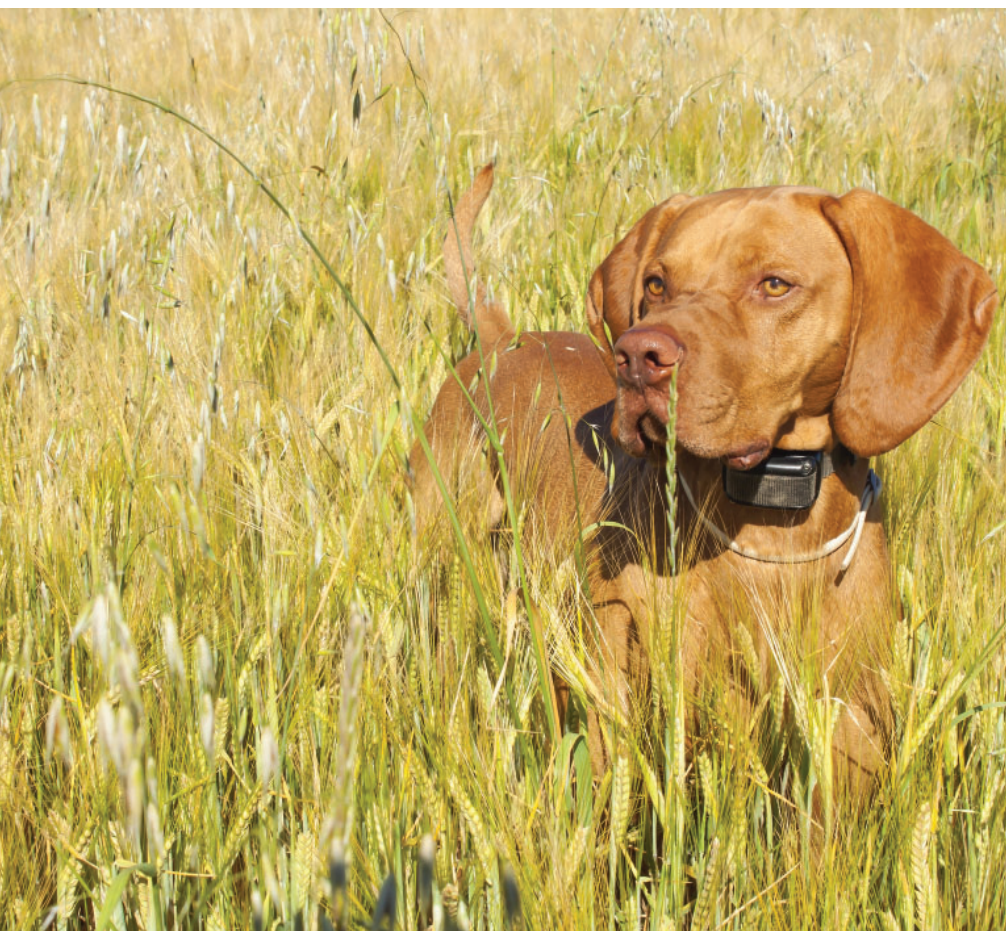


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Flawed research

Fast forward to a few months later in 2021 when three senior animal welfare academics comprehensively sank Defra's 'robust' scientific battleship. One of whom, a deputy dean and psychology professor at one of the world's top universities described the research as "too flawed to base policy decisions". The professor had felt compelled to write his damning indictment to fulfil the "critic and conscience obligations of universities and their staff". Defra's science suffered a further blow as evidence emerged that a lead scientist on its flagship study had previously written to the department calling for a ban on e-collars. It was apparent that Defra knew it was commissioning biased researchers.

So far this year, over 1,000 letters have landed with MPs from furious dog owners demanding that Defra account for its lack of evidence. Valid questions have been asked, including: "What research does Defra have to prove that a tasty treat will stop a determined dog from killing prey?" Beyond its now-discredited research, Defra concedes that it has none.

Keeping dogs on leads when 'near' livestock is common sense and is sound advice, but as a single recommendation it has failed to secure a reduction in attacks by dogs. What constitutes 'near' to the sensory capabilities of an opportunistic predator that can detect prey animals hundreds of metres before its owner sees the danger? How safe is a dog that has been taught little more than a village hall recall and has never been tested under the distraction of live, fleeing animals? This is the standard level achieved by Defra's recommended training groups. Defra cannot define the term 'near'. Also, rivers, roads, hedges, highways and railway tracks mean nothing to a dog determined to get to its quarry.

Wales shows the way

So, what research has been done to determine the impact a ban on e-collars would have on the number of protected animals getting attacked, and healthy dogs being killed as a result?

We need only look at Wales to provide the answer. Wales hurried through a ban on e-collars in 2010, providing a crystal ball into the consequences of a ban – should it proceed – in England. A four-year report into livestock attacks, conducted by five comparable rural police force areas between 2013 and 2017 revealed that North Wales had the highest number of reported attacks compared with the four English police force

areas. North Wales also shot dead 30% more healthy dogs than the four English forces combined. Although correlation might not equal causation, the Welsh ban has failed to protect or promote animal welfare. Welsh politicians knew at the time of the ban that one of the principal benefits of responsible e-collar use was to stop predatory attacks by dogs. The science behind the report showed:

- All 1,156 dogs displayed avoidance to the training stimuli after the first training session.
- E-collars resulted in complete and permanent elimination of aggression in all of the 36 dogs tested.
- No dogs showed interest in or attacked a lone sheep in the path test... The owners reported no negative effect on the dogs' behaviour... No adverse effects were observed with our test procedure.
- The e-collar averted all 13 attempted attacks on lambs... [and] greatly reduced the probability of subsequent attempted attacks.
- Aversion response from e-collars lasts at least one year after training.

But Wales chose to ignore this science.

In Spring 2022, NFU data showed that Wales had again suffered catastrophic attacks by uncontrolled dogs with four times the number of recorded incidents than Scotland (where e-collars remain legal). Wales seemed confused as to the cause of the attacks, firstly blaming dogs escaping from gardens, and then pointing the finger at lockdown, when more people took to the countryside to walk their dogs. This undeniably obvious animal welfare failure has caused MPs to speak out. National press and major farming media reported in April that former Welsh Secretary David Jones said: "The e-collar ban has failed and... is leading to many animal deaths." Plaid Cymru's Peredur Owen Griffiths MS said: "Being shot by a farmer is clearly far worse for the dog than being trained with a one-off startle from an e-collar."

Understanding dogs

Having trained and advised owners of thousands of dogs, in my experience the following is true...

Central to the problem of predatory attacks by dogs are two principal issues:

- The desire in the dog to chase and attack.
- The opportunity for the dog to satisfy that desire.

To date, every piece of official advice for dog owners has focused exclusively on addressing the *opportunity*, but never the *desire*. In my view, this is a fundamental policy failure.

The Association of Responsible Dog Owners (ARDO) fully endorses the message of keeping dogs on leads when known to be in the presence of vulnerable species, but ARDO also acknowledges and addresses the elephant in the room – training the dog. Restraining an untrained dog out of desperate necessity is worlds apart from responsibly attaching a lead to a well-trained dog as a mark of courtesy.

Defra is faced with two animal welfare issues. The first is hypothetical fabrication – that of the harm caused by e-collars. The second is a heavily documented onslaught affecting the entire UK – the threat of untrained, uncontrolled dogs attacking vulnerable animals.

Presently, e-collars remain legal everywhere in the UK besides Wales. ARDO supports a regulated approach to their use, with quality equipment being used following experienced, competent guidance. Used responsibly, they remain the most scientifically-proven, non-lethal means of efficiently and effectively training a dog to develop a lifelong avoidance towards a chosen animal – and dogs do not attack animals that they have been trained to avoid.

ARDO encourages as many people as possible to support us in writing to MPs to challenge this flawed attack on our right to protect our dogs and vulnerable farm and wildlife. ●



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