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Evolution and impact of different parameters on badger damage to maize fields in Wallonia

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Agricultural damage due to protected species is refunded to farmers by the Walloon Region, provided that the species involved and the extent of damages are assessed by an expert. Although the badger population is stable in Wallonia, the amount of damages in maize fields has recently increased. Besides that, wild boars are expanding in numbers and they are also known to be maize eaters. Since it is a game species, the hunters have to pay for the damage it causes. The aims of the study were :

- to study the evolution of badger and wild boar damages during the maize season in a sample of plots around Dinant and Marche;
- to compare damage estimation protocols used by several experts in order to propose a standardized and reliable method of assessment;
- to study the influence of different variables on the importance of damages : distance to the nearest badger den, type of vegetation cover around maize fields, distance to the closest forest edge...

For this purpose, 30 maize parcels were selected according to their proximity to a badger sett or because they formerly underwent damage compensation related to badgers. Badger and wild boar damages were evaluated four times from August to October, at intervals of more or less 10 days. For each site, the nearest badger den was located, distance to forest edge was measured and the vegetation structure was noted within 150 meters around the parcel. Our damage estimates were compared to those evaluated by the experts. The phenology of damage varied between parcels. However, significant differences were observed between our damage estimates and those of the experts. The disparity of among the methods employed partly explains this variability, each of them involving some sources of error. Therefore, a standardized method has been developed, in order to reduce this variability. It seems to be more reliable and should bring a decrease in the total amount of financial compensations refunded for badger damages, because of a reduced risk of overestimation.