IT'S GOOD TO SHARE

Ella Vogel and Rachel Stroud

River-surveying in Norfolk. Mike Powles/FLPA

A new portal enables ecological consultants to contribute to one of the world's largest biodiversity databases.

The National Biodiversity Network (NBN) is the largest partnership for nature in the UK. It was formed in April 2000 and its membership now includes practically all organisations involved in biological recording and wildlife conservation in Britain. Network members are committed to the collection and sharing of biological data in order to educate people about nature, to inform environmental decision-making, to aid conservation management and rewilding, and to monitor the changing state of our environment. The Network, through the efforts of its members in recording, checking and curating, is working to create a comprehensive, unparalleled and authoritative understanding of our natural world.

The Network's new five-year strategy, launched in July 2015, includes the aim of ensuring that the collected data are central to the UK's learning and understanding of its biodiversity and critical to all decision-making about nature and the environment.

A tradition of recording

This nation's rich tradition of amateur natural-history recording has made our islands some of the most comprehensively surveyed places on earth. Biological recording in Britain goes back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when 'parson naturalists' such as John Ray and Gilbert White began recording nature.

More than 30,000 biological records are now made every day in the UK, the vast majority of them by volunteers, amateurs and professionals

Hazel Dormouse survey. Derek Middleton/FLPA

alike who have a keen eye for recording and learning about their natural world.

To date, the Network has been hugely successful, with more than 110 million biological records shared via the National Biodiversity Network Gateway (https://data.nbn.org.uk), which is now one of the largest biodiversity databases for any country. In addition, 90 million records are held regionally by Local Environmental Records Centres across the UK. There are still taxonomic and geographical gaps in our knowledge, but very few countries around the world can boast such broad coverage in terms of data and information.

While the Network is vast and comprehensive, there are still opportunities to expand. Some organisations are nervous about sharing biological data because they are worried about how the data might be used, others do not have the time to share data, and still others do not know how to share their data. As biological recorders we have a moral responsibility to share our biological information so as to embed our collective data and knowledge efficiently at the heart of biodiversity-learning and environmental decision-making. Only then shall we truly be able to collaborate towards halting the decline of biodiversity across the UK.

One large and relatively untapped wealth of biodiversity information and knowledge exists within the UK's environmental consultancies. These collect thousands of biological records daily across the UK, often in remote, under-recorded areas, as part of their work to inform environmental-impact assessments and day-to-day planning decisions. Tight time restrictions and permission constraints mean that data-sharing by ecological consultants can often be hard.

The National Biodiversity Network is now working with the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) to help environmental and ecological consultancies to share their data. The CIEEM professional code of conduct states that: 'When preparing advice and reports members shall, wherever possible, make scientific data collected during the course of their professional duties available to others.' Until recently, with no clear mechanism for these data to be shared, this process has proved time-consuming and data have ended up in a variety of places.

Some consultants do share their data directly with Local Environmental Records Centres, others share them directly with the NBN, and some may go to a local county recorder or national biological recording scheme such as the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland or Butterfly Conservation. It is an unfortunate truth, however, that the vast majority of these data remain hidden from view within client reports, used once and then lost or forgotten. Improving the efficiency of the flow of data so that they can be used more than once to inform decisions about our biodiverse heritage is a high priority for the National Biodiversity Network.

Introducing the new platform

The Network has worked with CIEEM and its members to develop a simple online data-management platform specifically for ecological consultants. The aim of this platform is to help consultants to share their biological records easily via the National Biodiversity Network, so that they can be used by Local Environmental Records Centres, researchers, NGOs, interested members of the public and many others.

This platform is called the 'Consultants Portal' and it was launched in autumn 2015 (see www.consultantsportal.uk). Registration with the Consultants Portal is free and the platform is suitable for consultancies of all sizes. It will help those with CIEEM accreditation to fulfil their

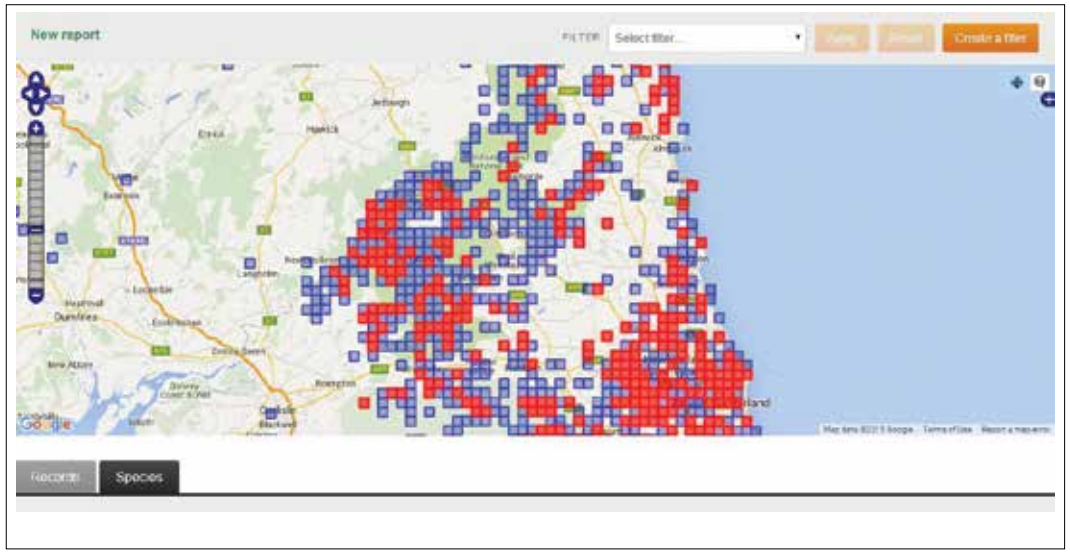

Figure 1 Screenshot of the Consultants Portal showing records from north-east England of Common Toad *Bufo bufo*, highlighted among other biological records in the area. The Common Toad records are shown in red. All other records are in blue.

stated duty of making scientific data available to others. Over the next six months, the Consultants Portal will become the primary online repository for ecological professionals to share their data in the UK.

A bulk-upload tool enables quick upload of data from a spreadsheet, and bespoke species forms allow individual and *ad hoc* records also to be submitted. Photos can be attached to records as additional data and to aid verification. Sensitive records can be blurred to a suitable resolution to protect the species location and/or project confidentiality where necessary. Data are stored securely online in a consistent format, thus simplifying analysis and use. Users can view or download both their own records and all records from their consultancy. These records may be downloaded in spreadsheet, map or summary formats, and can be used directly in client reports (see Fig.1).

The Consultants Portal is linked to the NBN Gateway, and these data, once verified, are automatically made available for wider use. Although with emphasis on environmental consultants, the Consultants Portal has proved to be a useful tool for specialist recorders who have large volumes of data, as well as for recording groups which have multiple members working on a specific project. The NBN Secretariat offers free training and support in using the system.

The project has been developed in close partnership with the Association of Local Environmental Records Centres (ALERC) to ensure that records are disseminated to the relevant place, as well as to national recording schemes. A large group of ecologists has been consulted during the development of the Portal, and a steering group of environmental professionals has overseen its progress.

The strength of the National Biodiversity Network lies in collaboration. Through sharing biological records we aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the changing state of Britain's wildlife. In turn, that will help the protection and restoration of our biological diversity, ensuring that our rich and varied natural heritage is conserved for future generations.

Ella Vogel works for the NBN Secretariat and her work focuses on developing and promoting the Consultants Portal. **Rachel Stroud** works for the NBN Secretariat as its Data and Liaison Officer. Her role involves supporting the Network in all stages of data flow from collection to analysis and use through implementation of the NBN Strategy 2015–2020.