

The Consultants Portal - helping consultants share biological data

“When preparing advice and reports members shall wherever possible, make scientific data collected during the course of their professional duties available to others such as records centres.” CIEEM professional code of conduct.

The National Biodiversity Network (NBN), in partnership with CIEEM, has built an online data management portal (www.consultantsportal.uk) for ecologists and environmental consultants to facilitate and enable the management and sharing of their biological data.

Sharing biological records helps create knowledge about the environment which can then be used in environmental decision-making, in education and in reversing declines in native wildlife. All those who observe, record and collect biological information, including all ecological consultants in the UK, have a responsibility to share their data and so contribute to an increasingly complete picture of the state of our environment.

The NBN is the largest partnership for nature in the UK and its membership includes most organisations involved in biological recording and wildlife conservation in Britain. Network members are committed to the collection and sharing of biological data to educate people about nature, inform environmental decision-making, aid conservation management and to monitor the changing state of our environment. Together network members have shared over 110 million biological records via the NBN Gateway (<https://data.nbn.org.uk/>) to create one of the largest biodiversity databases in the world for any country.

Although an extraordinary achievement, the NBN Gateway still has data gaps; certain geographic areas and taxonomic groups are underrepresented, surveys may be unstructured so affecting potential uses, and duplication of survey effort sometimes happens. Any data gap has implications for environmental management, for educating people and for understanding ecological change. Professional ecologists and environmental consultants can play a significant role in plugging some of these data gaps.

Improving data flows so that they can be used more than once to inform environmental decision-making is a high priority for the NBN. That is why the NBN and CIEEM have worked to create an online data management portal for ecologists and environmental consultants to aid the efficient sharing of biological data.

Some consultants already share their biological data, either with Local Environmental Records Centres (LERCs), with the NBN, or with a county recorder or national biological recording schemes. However, the vast majority of these data remain hidden from view within client reports, used once and then lost or forgotten. Furthermore, the time and cost of digitising biological records is often cited as a barrier to sharing. Consultants also have privacy concerns that affect the likelihood of records being shared.

CIEEM and the NBN have created the ‘Consultants Portal’ as a free data management and sharing tool for consultancies of all sizes. With spreadsheet upload tools, the capacity to add photos to records and the ability to view and download spreadsheets and maps of your records, the Consultants Portal will especially help CIEEM accredited consultants to achieve their duty to ‘*make scientific data ...available to others*’, as is stated in the CIEEM Code of Professional Conduct.

The Portal also acts as a storage cloud, records can be added and accessed, from computer, tablet or phone. Consultants will save time managing data by using downloadable data summary tables and maps through being able to collate records from multiple members of staff.

The NBN Secretariat has worked closely with the Association of Local Environmental Records Centres (ALERC) to ensure the Consultants Portal meets their needs and that biological records submitted via the Portal will be disseminated via LERCs and National Recording Schemes as required.

The NBN Secretariat is offering free training and support in using the Consultants Portal, either remotely or at your place of work. Please contact the NBN (contact details below) if you would like to know more about Portal or the training on offer, and how we can support your use of this new data sharing platform.

For all enquiries and further information on the Consultants Portal please contact us at consultantsportal@nbn.org.uk. Finally, if you would like to join the Network, please see our website membership pages at nbn.org.uk.

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