Scottish Biodiversity Information Forum
BRISC Sectorial Discussion
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A Record of the Discussion of Data Management and Data Sharing

Alexa Tweddle[1] and Tom Hunt[2]

The Association of Local Environmental Record Centres was asked by BRISC to lead a discussion of the management and sharing of biodiversity data. Four Scottish LRCs were represented at the discussion, along with several schemes and societies, such as the RSPB and BSBI. Amateur naturalists were also represented, as too were several other groups who work with biodiversity data. A lot of topics were covered under the headings "data management" and "data sharing" and a list of issues, along with some potential solutions, was produced.

Data Management

Who is a data manager?

To get the session underway, a show of hands was given to ascertain who thought they were a "data manager". All the hands around the table went up, showing that everyone attending considered themselves a data manager of some type. This provided a sound basis for discussion and meant that, although there were many different organisations and viewpoints being represented, the people round the table are facing many of the same challenges.

Software

One of the shared issues that came up straight away was that of the data management software. The main piece of software in use is Recorder 6. Eight people around the table use it (although three of those are from the same organisation). Other systems in use are:
- Mapmate
- Levana (Butterfly Conservation bespoke software)
- Excel spreadsheets

It was asked whether the variety of systems was causing problems for data managers. Many people are finding that Microsoft Excel spreadsheets are very useful as an input tool for getting data into a database. However, once in a database, it can be difficult to transfer data from one database to the other. It was also noted that by using a combination of other programmes (e.g. Microsoft Word), and templates in those programmes, a simple way of producing useful output can be created.

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[1] Fife Nature Records Centre and Director, Association of Local Environmental Record Centres
[2] Association of Local Environmental Record Centres, National Coordinator

The next question that was posed was, considering that Recorder 6 is the most common data management system, is it fit for purpose? It was concluded that it is, but there is a need to share expertise amongst its users. There is also a need to try and get Recorder 6 to communicate better with other systems, especially Mapmate. This might be possible if resources can be found to pay for further development of Recorder 6.

Validation and Verification

The second issue raised was that of validation and verification of data. It was agreed that a lack of validation and verification provided a barrier to effective data management.

It was felt that Recorder 6 could be improved to help alleviate these issues as well. It could be better at tracking the verification status of records.

A serious issue is the lack of expert verifiers. Should funding be sought to pay verifiers? Traditionally verification has been done by volunteers such as county recorders, and it was thought that LRCs are well placed to work with county recorders by sharing data and creating good will in order to get records verified. Despite this there may need to be verification expertise sought from new channels. One of these could be The Conservation Volunteers *Natural Talent* training programme, which could try and push their biodiversity apprentices down the verification route.

The BSBI is tackling verification by dividing plant species into four groups depending on their difficulty for identification. This means that many records will not require expert verification and those that do require different levels of corroborative evidence.

In terms of the organisational aspects of verification, a significant problem can be contact between the recorders and the experts. For example, people are often happy to place photographs on iSpot and receive a positive identification, but they need to be encouraged to follow up on their experience by learning how to identify things themselves. This point was also stressed in the morning session as well.

Could some of these problems be solved by a national standard for verification and a national standard of data flow? It was thought that this could help, but the standards need not be the same for every taxonomic group.

Several other key points were made:
- The NBN Record Cleaner will be an important tool for verifying data efficiently.
- It is important to recognise that the expertise of recorders is "rated", although this is often done informally by national and local schemes and societies.
- Verification needs a distinct local focus.

- It is important to make sure all the necessary information is retained with records, such as the date, recorder name and publication used to obtain the identification.
- The SBIF should agree a standard policy for use of recorder names, and whether these are included on data uploaded to the NBN Gateway. This can be a sensitive issue and it is very important to get it right.

Issues of data sharing

Protected species data

A major issue preventing data from being shared is the issue of protected species. There are some protected species interest groups who are unwilling to share their data because they believe it could be misused. However, this may mean that the data is not being used for conservation purposes and to protect species from developments etc. An agreed policy on protected species might help alleviate this problem.

Data from ecological consultancies

The fact that survey data from ecological consultancies is usually not shared is a problem that affects the whole of the UK and is being discussed at a UK level. There were a few specific points made by the group:
- Some consultancy reports are redacted because of the sensitivity of protected species.
- Some reports are not even available to read online because of protected species sensitivity.
- The legal situation around copyright and ownership of data requires clarification.

A potential solution to these problems would be for the Chief Planning Officer to advise local authorities that they ought to be making the ecological data from the planning process available.

It was agreed that the SBIF should make it its goal to make first person consultancy field records available to everyone. This may need support from SNH.

Data flow

It was asked whether it will be possible to have an agreed model of data flow. This question created several further questions and points:
- Traditionally data would move first from recorder to NSS.
- Where a recorder has to send data to many NSSs, it can be preferable to send it to the LRC to divide up and forward to the NSSs.
- However, as Scotland is not completely covered by LRCs, this won't always work.
- There also needs to be working data sharing agreements in place between LRCs and NSSs.

- Is there an issue with the same records appearing on the Gateway several times (this may depend on what the data is being used for)?
- The fact that different groups have different requirements for data, and that there is not a full coverage of LRCs, is a significant barrier to data flow models, and something the SBIF needs to get to grips with.
- LRCs may prefer to receive data from local recorders and then send it to the relevant NSSs. However, in instances where this doesn't happen they can still access data through the NBN Web Services.