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Biological Recording in Scotland

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*Report of the Networking Naturalists seminar:
Battleby, Perth, 20th May 2002*

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Biodiversity
Network**



Biological Recording in Scotland

**Report of the Networking Naturalists seminar
Battleby, Perth
20th May 2002**

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Introduction

Twenty-seven delegates attended this seminar, aimed at exploring what is needed for enhancing the role of volunteers and others in their work of biological recording, specifically in Scotland.

The session was chaired by Michael Scott, Depute Chairman of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), who welcomed attendees and set the scene for the day's discussions. With SNH's broad interest in the use of biodiversity information, and its recognition of the role of both local records centres and the voluntary network in gathering those records, he was especially enthusiastic about the opportunity this seminar gave to develop the business of biological recording in Scotland.

Trevor James
NBN Development Officer for Schemes & Societies
June 2002

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A regional framework for biological recording in Scotland

Anne-Marie Smout, Biological Recording in Scotland (BRISC)

Anne-Marie gave a wide-ranging analysis of both the history behind recording, the current state of play, and of the strategic need to define a way forward on a number of fronts if Scotland is to have adequate biodiversity information. She presented a seven-point plan, focusing especially on the need for greater organisation:

- Extend the network of regional recorders for every group. She noted that this approach had been seen to be particularly effective for some groups, such as butterflies. Important issues included putting in place the resources needed to validate records, to provide vital feedback to volunteers, to set up and run training, and to delegate activity and thereby spread the load. Local Records Centres play a key role in this, through their ability to generate local support, and to direct activity. However, an important missing element in many cases was the lack of a specifically Scottish representative for many national (UK) recording societies and schemes, although some, such as the Botanical Society, do have local co-ordinators. It is also important to consider prioritisation of recording effort.
- Agree a charter for volunteer recorders. This was seen as a way to standardise the approach to recording, leading to a streamlining of communication networks.
- Find money for volunteer expenses. While volunteer involvement can be encouraged, it needs to be remembered that their data is only available through their generosity, and so funds to pay expenses are needed.
- Devise ways of recruiting new recorders. Publicity and outreach to attract new recruits was becoming increasingly important.
- Improve communication between data custodians. A priority needs to be the effective mobilisation of information. This is being tackled in part through the National Biodiversity Network, and through improved data management.
- Aim to computerise all data holdings and make these freely available. In part this follows on from the previous point. A particular issue was that of the backlog of data held by various parties.
- Find ways of achieving a fully-functional network of Local Records Centres. The importance of the local records centres in Scotland is being recognised now by SNH, and supported to some extent. There needed to be thought given as to the number actually needed, and their area of coverage.

Finally, the question of resourcing these proposals was raised. It was suggested that owing to the strategic importance of biodiversity data, this could legitimately be the subject of a bid by the NBN to the Scottish Executive for funding.

Managing biological information in Scotland: voluntary bodies and local records centres

Ross Spalding, Fife Nature

Two important issues in the business of managing biodiversity data were: the importance of integrating biodiversity data in such a way as to facilitate its use, especially for such purposes as planning and conservation; and to reduce the burden of recording and managing data.

The flow of data from recorders needed to be encouraged, and one important way to do this was to ensure that they had good feedback, and were also fed relevant data in return. However, Ross pointed out that, with the increasing need for quite sophisticated data, especially concerning habitats, there was also an increasing involvement of “professionals” in gathering those data.

Another key issue was the quality of data. Whether it is professional or amateur data, it is important to encourage quality, both in the identification and definition of what is recorded, and in the way that the data are managed. In this, he felt that national societies and recording schemes had a key responsibility to examine this issue, and to put in place effective methods of data validation.

Ross also examined the fraught question of data ownership. With modern electronic data communication, it was becoming increasingly important to ensure that intellectual rights, copyright etc. were fully taken into account and managed properly.

Finally, in local records centres, the question of charging for services was becoming increasingly a question. Ways to do this, through charging for time, not data, and ways to secure resources otherwise, needed to be examined, to ensure data is communicated effectively.

The work of specialists in recording: saproxylic diptera in Scottish woodlands

Graham Rotheray, Royal Museums of Scotland

Graham chose to look at this through illustration of the recent work by members of the Malloch Society looking at red data flies in Scottish woodlands. He showed how this small, but highly expert team, recruited from across the UK, had researched existing data on selected rare species of flies, often about which very little had been known.

The group then carried out detailed survey extensively across Scotland, identifying firstly larval breeding ecology and therefore looking for likely sites and micro-habitats. Some species were shown to be far less “endangered” than had previously been thought, while others were shown to be extremely restricted in their occurrence, and highly dependent on precise habitats, sometimes even a few individual trees or stumps.

The importance of aspen, hitherto neglected in Scotland, was also discovered. From these surveys, it had been possible to generate highly-targeted recommendations on habitat management geared specifically to these (and other) species.

The talk clearly illustrated two things: that much highly important work on species is carried out by a small number of expert volunteers, not necessarily linked in to local activity; and that the mobilisation of these data is a vital need in effective biodiversity conservation.

What the National Biodiversity Network has to offer

Jeff Watson, SNH/NBN Trust

Jeff gave a generic presentation on what the National Biodiversity Network comprises, its objectives, and how it is being developed. In particular, he emphasised its partnership approach, and its provision of mechanisms and standards to enable participants to exchange data.

At present, the NBN's electronic Gateway was in process of development, alongside other elements needed to make the system work, such as the Species Index and guidance on data quality. However, it was already apparent that the concept had the power to do much of what had been mentioned earlier in terms of communicating data. He illustrated a couple of simple searches using the NBN Gateway and particular data-sets, and showed the intended way that data from different sources could be overlaid, and linked with data on sites. An important element of the NBN is its control of access to data. Potential contributors of data needed to be sure that their data would be managed properly, and that, if they needed to restrict access to these data, this would operate effectively.

In the meantime, partners, and potential contributors of data needed to develop their own operations to enable them to participate. At the same time, they needed to consider how the NBN could be used for their own purposes, such as using a tailored version of the Gateway to deliver information. The NBN offers a highly effective way of integrating remote data sets for potential end use. Its future development is strongly supported by all the key UK agencies, including SNH, as the way forward.

Discussion Session

“Break-out groups” were set up to discuss three main topics, arising from the morning’s papers, from which each brought back key points:

Developing volunteer capacity.

The main issues here were:

- The need for a system to streamline volunteer involvement in recording, especially enabling people to record data only once. The need to spread the load of the system was highlighted, for example by using local records centres to support local volunteers. Feedback was also considered an essential element.
- The need to have a more co-ordinated approach to training, especially to bring on more people in smaller schemes, and for courses at different levels. Support from professional institutions like museums should be developed. It was felt that one way of taking this forward was through peripatetic trainers, supported centrally, perhaps by SNH.
- Prioritisation of recording projects was also important, with an emphasis on more habitat recording, and on time-limited focused surveys, as well as developing recording in groups not so far effectively covered by recording schemes.
- The idea of a charter for recorders was taken up, aimed at voluntary recorders in national societies and recording schemes, as well as others, and emphasising the need to link with other organisations and not to act in isolation.
- Finally, active encouragement of volunteer effort through feedback, acknowledgement and involvement, recognising the varied motives of those doing the recording.

Mobilising information.

Key issues emerged as:

- The need to define clear protocols for different elements in data management, such as field recording (e.g. spatial levels and attention to site and locality data); data sharing (simplifying the flow of data from recorders to others); data access by end-users.
- The need to account for the security of data, such as the safe management of datasets and systems of onward transmission, as well as to take effective account of issues like confidentiality and data sensitivity.
- The need for a system of data mobilisation to take full account of the financial support needed for the providers of data, including the potential impact of the system on existing funding sources.
- The technical issues of computerisation, ranging from dealing with quantities of original data, through to data validation, technical know-how and support.

Priorities for future action.

The main points which emerged were:

- The need for greater co-operation between local records centres and national recording schemes/societies to sort out the issue of confused data flows. Local records centres could act as a local focus for action. BRISC was considered important assisting with this.
- The need for an increased active engagement with the NBN by statutory agencies, non-governmental bodies, local records centres and voluntary groups, with SNH needing especially to take a more active lead.
- Increasing the mobilisation of data, such as by tying the availability of grants to its mobilisation.
- The need to ensure that feedback especially to voluntary groups is improved.
- Changing the approach to recruiting, training and mentoring volunteers, for example by focusing on LBAP support, and using the team approach, as used by Scottish Wildlife Trust.
- The need for the NBN and the NBN Trust to consult more with its potential users.
- The potential for SNH to lead by mobilising its own data, both in-house and publicly, using the NBN.
- The promotion of better quality of data through application of standards, such as through linking funding to the promotion of best practice.
- Finally, ensuring that recording and data mobilisation initiatives are seen to involve the whole of the UK, and that proper feedback and acknowledgement are given.

The seminar was rounded off with a summary by Michael Scott, highlighting the key points which had emerged, and especially noting a number of potential action points such as getting the idea of a peripatetic support officer into the proposed Scottish Biodiversity Forum's Environmental Strategy. He emphasised SNH's ongoing commitment to the recording process through others, such as the developing support for local records centres, although there were still resource problems to be tackled. BRISC's important role was also acknowledged.

Attendees

Lesley Brown, C.A.R.S.E., Smith Museum, Stirling
Alan Cameron, The Wildlife Trusts
Barry Constantine, Dermestoid & Bostrichoid Beetle Recording Scheme
Gordon B. Corbet, Leven, Fife
Joanna Drewitt, Scottish Executive
Lynne Farrell, Scottish Natural Heritage
Andrew Ferguson, NE Scotland Biological Records Centre
Paul Harding, Biological Records Centre, CEH Monks Wood
David S. Henderson, Dundee City Council
Mr. Thomas Huxley, Aquatic Heteroptera Recording Scheme
Janet Imlach, NE Scotland Biological Records Centre
Trevor James, NBN Trust / CEH Monks Wood
Paul Kirkland, Butterfly Conservation
Justin Kuncaitis, Scottish Wildlife Trust
Craig Macadam, Ephemeroptera Recording Scheme
Ed Mackey, Scottish Natural Heritage
Alan McKirdy, Scottish Natural Heritage (Speaker)
Jim Munford, NBN Trust
Graham Rotheray, National Museums of Scotland (Speaker)
Cath Scott, Glasgow City Council
Michael Scott, Scottish Natural Heritage (Speaker)
Mark Simmons, Perth Museum
Anne-Marie Smout, Biological Recording In Scotland (Speaker)
Alastair Sommerville, Biodiversity Solutions
Ross Spalding, Fife Nature (Speaker)
Jenny Storey, North Lanarkshire Council
Jeff Watson, Scottish Natural Heritage / NBN Trust (Speaker)