

National Federation for Biological Recording

**BIOLOGICAL RECORDING
IN A
CHANGING LANDSCAPE**

edited by

P. T. Harding and D. A. Roberts

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Proceedings of a seminar and workshops held at the
inaugural conference of the National Federation for
Biological Recording, Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge,
15-16 April 1986.

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P.T. HARDING and D.A. ROBERTS

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Biological recording in a changing landscape

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PREFACE

This volume is a collection of four seminar papers and the reports of 10 workshops, from the Inaugural Conference of the National Federation for Biological Recording (NFBR). The Conference, held in Cambridge over two days in April 1986, was attended by over 80 people drawn from a wide variety of locations and disciplines, but all with an involvement or interest in the collection, management, dissemination and use of biological information about our environment.

The volume takes its title from the seminar, but all the workshops were highly pertinent to the topic, dealing as they did with the practical aspects of records and the problems and priorities of those involved with recording.

In his Introduction, Geoff Stansfield has briefly described how the National Federation for Biological Recording came into being. Whether the Federation has a future depends not only on the commitment and energy of its officers, but also on the support of its membership. It is only by expressing a corporate view, through the Federation, that the needs for biological recording, at all levels, will be clearly heard.

As conference organizers and editors, we have been fortunate in having the support and enthusiasm of our contributors. We are very grateful to them all for presenting their papers, or convening their workshops, and for preparing written summaries (with only a minimum amount of harassment from us).

We should also express our (and their) gratitude to the anonymous note-takers at each workshop who helped collate the discussions. Many other people deserve thanks: the Steering Committee of the National Federation for Biological Recording, chaired by Charles Copp, who helped us plan the meeting; Llywela Hopkins of The Museum Documentation Association (MDA), who dealt with most of the administration of the meeting; Jayne Abblitt of the Biological Records Centre (BRC), who prepared much of the publicity for the meeting; Sheila Green and the domestic staff at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge for providing an excellent venue; and Anna Mackay-Smith of MDA for typing these proceedings.

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ACRONYMS

BCG	Biology Curators' Group
BRC	Biological Records Centre
BSBI	Botanical Society of the British Isles
CSD	Chief Scientist Directorate (NCC)
DPA	Data Protection Act 1984
EEC	European Economic Community
EDU	Ecological Data Unit
ESA	Environmentally Sensitive Area
FWAG	Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
ITE	Institute of Terrestrial Ecology
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
MDA	Museum Documentation Association
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NCC	Nature Conservancy Council
NERC	Natural Environment Research Council
NFBR	National Federation for Biological Recording
NNR	National Nature Reserve
NVC	National Vegetation Classification
RSNC	Royal Society for Nature Conservation
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
WCA	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

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INTRODUCTION

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Biological recording is not a new activity. It has its origins in the work of the amateur Victorian naturalists who painstakingly and meticulously assembled collections of animals and plants, recording their finds in diaries and field note-books. What is new, is the recognition that a well organised system of biological recording is an essential pre-requisite of conservation planning and is also a very valuable resource for heritage interpretation.

The growth of the biological recording movement and its co-ordination at a national level through such schemes as the Botanical Society of the British Isles' (BSBI) Atlas of the British Flora and the national Biological Records Centre (BRC) has been well documented and described elsewhere, but the present level of activity and concern needs some explanation.

There have been several moves to improve the co-ordination of biological recording and to put the movement on a firmer organisational and financial footing. In 1973, the Leicester Conference "Centres for Environmental Records" (Stansfield, 1973), sponsored jointly by the Department of Museum Studies of Leicester University and the BRC failed to achieve its objective of having the biological recording function recognised as a top-tier local authority responsibility in the reorganisation of local government in 1974. A similar conference in Scotland, BIOREC 1975, did little more than draw attention to the problems and review the present situation (Sommerville, 1977).

In the 1970s a series of articles appeared describing the operation and recording systems adopted by various record centres, and in the early 1980s the Biology Curators' Group (BCG) published the results of surveys of biological record centres (Harding and Greenwood, 1981; Greenwood and Harding, 1982; Whiteley, 1983).

In 1984 the BCG felt that it was time for a new initiative. There had been a tremendous growth in the amount of time and manpower being devoted to recording. Museums had been able to take advantage of government sponsored Manpower Services schemes, as also had county naturalists trusts, some of which, with their growth in membership and with the support of the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC), had begun to computerise their records. Many national societies were also embarking on new recording schemes so that communication and coordination between the various schemes and organisations had become a major problem.

The seminar held in 1984 at Leicester, "Biological recording and the use of site based biological information" (Biology Curators' Group, 1985), although wide-ranging and rather diffuse, did arrive at some fairly predictable conclusions which set the scene for the present movement. The seminar confirmed the widely held view 'that the present situation, both nationally and locally, for biological recording, storage and retrieval of data was unsatisfactory' and it drew attention to the problems of standards and finance. Although the seminar produced few constructive proposals, it did lead to the setting up, at the instigation of the BRC, of an ad hoc group, drawn from the BCG and other interested organisations, to find means of improving the situation.