NATIONAL FEDERATION FOR BIOLOGICAL RECORDING

National Perspectives in Biological Recording in the UK

Report of the Annual Conference held at the Central Electricity Generating Board in London on Thursday 11th May 1989

edited by G.Stansfield and P.T.Harding

National Federation for Biological Recording
Cambridge, 1990.

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Glossary of abbreviations and acronyms

AUTOCAD	A computer-aided design package
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BCG	Biology Curators' Group
BM(NH)	Natural History Museum (London)
BRC	Biological Records Centre (ITE Monks Wood)
BRISC	Biological Recording in Scotland Campaign
BSBI	Botanical Society of the British Isles
BTO	British Trust for Ornithology
CBC	Common Birds Census
CEGB	Central Electricity Generating Board
COREDATA	Conservation Resources Database (NCC)
CP/M	Control Program Monitor - a disk operating system
DOE	Department of the Environment
EC	European Commission
EIC	Environmental Information Centre (ITE)
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FC	Forestry Commission
GB	Great Britain
GIS	Geographical Information System
GWGS	Greenland White-fronted Goose Study
HQ	Headquarters
IBM	International Business Machines
ITE	Institute of Terrestial Ecology
IUCN	Internation Union for the Conservation of Nature
IWRB	International Waterfowl &Wetlands Research Bureau
JANET	Joint Academic Network
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food
MBS	Moorland Birds Study
MDA	Museum Documentation Association
MS/DOS	Microsoft (Corporation) Disk Operating System
NCC	Nature Conservancy Council
NERC	Natural Environment Research Council
NFBR	National Federation for Biological Recording
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NNR	National Nature Reserve
PC	Personal computer
PSS	Packet Switching System
RAD	Rural Areas Database
RBBP	Rare Breeding Birds Panel
RECORDER	Biological records computerization system devised for NCC & NFBR by Dr S G Ball
RSNC	Royal Society for Nature Conservation
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
VWT	Vincent Wildlife Trust
WSG	Wader Study Group

Introduction

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The 5th Annual Meeting of the National Federation for Biological Recording was held at the offices of the Central Electricity Generating Board at Sudbury House in London and the Federation is pleased to record its appreciation to CEGB both for providing the venue for the meeting and for a financial contribution towards the publication of these proceedings.

It was thought appropriate that the fourth annual conference of the NFBR should focus on some national perspectives in biological recording in the United Kingdom. The papers which follow present a timely account of developments and issues relating to biological recording in the UK.

We have high hopes for the Coordinating Commission on Biological Recording in the UK which is shortly to start work. It is our belief that this conference report, together with the reports of previous conferences in 1986 and 1987 provide a lasting and valuable contribution to the philosophy and practice of bilogical recording, and provide an excellent basis for the work of the Commission.

Biological Survey: Need and Network - a review of progress towards national policies

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Introduction

The paper reviews recent initiatives in the co-ordination of biological recording in the United Kingdom, with special reference to the need for national policies. National and local recording are considered and changes in circumstances (particularly staff and computing capacity) and of priorities are noted. The roles of key organizations are described. The recommendations of a Linnean Society working party on biological recording were discussed at a meeting convened by NERC and the outcome of that meeting has been the formation of a steering group to facilitate the recommendations.

Oscillating natural history

In his presidential address to the Linnean Society Professor Berry (1983) discussed the growth of 'professional biology', at the expense of 'natural history' at the end of the 19th century. He noted, however, that since the Second World War 'natural history', particularly when linked to wildlife conservation, has regained impetus. I would go further to suggest that 'natural history' has never had so many followers, be they mainly somewhat passive, such as most members of the RSPB and wildlife trusts, or be they active practitioners - field naturalists. Increased leisure time (and the enforced leisure of unemployment and early retirement), greater mobility, constant media exposure and a boom in publishing have all fueled the fire of enthusiasm for natural history. However, the emphasis is less scientific than, say, before the 1939-45 war, with increased interest in conservation and in rare species. Few amateurs have published on the biology of species in recent decades, but this change may partly be due to competition (whether real or perceived) with professional scientists.

National recording

Biological recording has undergone significant changes since the first formalized national recording scheme began in 1954 with the BSBI's project to map the distribution of vascular plants and which culminated in the Atlas of the British Flora (Perring & Walters 1962). The Biological Records Centre (BRC) was set up in 1964, originally to map the flora and fauna of the British Isles, but its role has developed and changed significantly in the last 25 years (Harding 1984, 1985).

Local recording

Although the collection of information on wildlife has had a strong local bias for at least 150 years, formalized environmental recording, at a local level, came to the fore in the early 1970s. A conference in 1973 brought together the majority of those concerned with local biological records centres (Stansfield 1973) and in 1977, the Museums Association convened a Standing Committee on Environmental Record Centres (Stewart 1980a, b) which met annually for a few years up to 1981. Also in 1977, the Biological Recording in Scotland Committee (BRISC) was formed (Somerville 1977). A meeting of records centre organizers was held at Monks Wood in December 1977 and, as a result, a Handbook for Biological Records Centres was produced in 1978 (Flood & Perring 1978).

The last major review of local records centres was made in 1980 (Harding & Greenwood 1981, Greenwood & Harding 1982) which documented the work, facilities and staffing of over 60 centres. Most local centres were based at local authority-funded museums and worked without much reference to what similar organizations were doing. The Museum Documentation Association published an issue of MDA Information devoted to environmental recording (Anon 1984), which reviewed some of the major areas of work at the time.

Biology Curators' Group

In the absence of any 'parent body' or co-ordinating group, many local centre managers looked to the Biology Curators' Group (BCG) and its Newsletter as a medium through which to publicize their work and to discuss topics. By the early 1980s, a significant part of the BCG Newsletter was devoted to topics related to biological recording, including contributions by Whiteley (1983), Copp (1984), Ely (1984), Francis (1984), Garland & Whiteley (1984) and Harding (1984).

BCG convened an important seminar in September 1984 to discuss biological recording (Anon 1985). The seminar made the following conclusions:

1. The present situation both nationally and locally for biological recording, storage and retrieval of data is unsatisfactory.

2. Agreed standards should be set for biological recording, but due regard must be given to amateur naturalists who collect valuable information but who may not wish to be tied to particular methods of recording.

3. Where applicable, museums should provide a local biological data bank service.

4. Local biological data banks should provide a range of services to the public in general.

5. Biological recording is not adequately financed.

The seminar also resolved that "the Biology Curator's Group should set up a working group including other interested organizations to investigate the present situation in relation to biological recording and in the light of Nature Conservation in Great Britain (Nature Conservancy Council 1984) take steps to improve the situation and seek appropriate financial resources".

Resulting from this seminar, two initiatives developed. At a 'practical' level, BCG and BRC collaborated to set up the Biological Recording Forum, 1985 (Copp & Harding 1985) from which the National Federation for Biological Recording (NFBR) has developed and at at 'political' level, the Linnean Society set up a working party chaired by Professor Berry.

Independent of these two initiatives, in 1986 NCC and Wildlife Link formed the Joint NCC/NGO Data handling Group.

National Federation for Biological Recording

The National Federation for Biological Recording was launched at a conference at Cambridge in April 1986. It represents the concern of many scientists, conservationists and amateur naturalists in the UK that the importance of biological recording is not sufficiently recognized and that funding and co-ordination are needed.

NFBR is too young an organization to have much of a history. It was formed with great enthusiasm, but there are limitations to what a small group of volunteers, already in full-time employment, can achieve.

The Federation seeks to involve the many agencies active in biological recording and, in doing so, to help improve their effectiveness in gathering, managing and disseminating biological records. The immediate aim of the Federation has been to improve awareness of the importance of biological recording in all organizations concerned with the environment. It has looked at practical issues and has been involved in 'political' issues too. Three successful annual conferences precede this one: in 1986 on biological recording in a changing landscape (Harding & Roberts 1986), in 1987 on the products of biological recording (Stansfield & Harding 1988) and in 1988 on the use of computers in biological recording. NFBR communicates with its members through a periodic newsletter.

I may be biased, but without the intrusiveness and persistence of NFBR we might not have progressed as far as we have down the long road (Figure 1) identified at the BCG seminar in 1984.

Changing circumstances

The employment crisis of the late 1970s provided a means for local records centres to gain extra staff through various schemes operated by the Manpower Services Commission. Whilst they lasted, many centres flourished with numerous extra staff. In some cases, local centres set up using MSC schemes have formed the basis of new, local authority financed, centres. Employment Training appears to be less suitable for placing staff in centres and this valuable source of manpower has now almost completely ended. A few records centres have benefited from one or two extra members of staff, especially where the value of the centre's data is recognized, at the local authority headquarters.

Computers have come to play an increasingly important part in the thinking and in the practice of biological recording. In 1980, the BCG/BRC survey of local centres found that only 7% of the local centres responding had access to a computer (Greenwood & Harding 1982). By 1985, 30 centres and naturalists trusts made use of computers (Copp in Copp & Harding 1985). Up-to-date figures are not available, but the number of records centres with access to computers has probably increased considerably. The implementation of the RECORDER records management package, through collaboration between NCC, RSNC and WWF will lead to more computerization and greater standardization, and