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NATIONAL FEDERATION FOR BIOLOGICAL RECORDING

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**NATIONAL FEDERATION FOR BIOLOGICAL RECORDING  
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## Chairman's Piece

While we are all waiting for the outcome of the NBN developments, and the deployment of *Recorder 2000* as the answer to our prayers for data management, it's as good a time-killer as any to be looking at what else is happening with the natural environment. This is one reason why next year's Annual Conference of the NFBR is going to be targeted at 'Biodiversity data: provision and application'. The UKBAP Group has now produced a good set of biodiversity action plans for everyone to get their teeth into, so where do we go from here?

There are a lot of unanswered questions. Are we really sure all these biodiversity targets are useful? Have we got to the bottom of what is really worthwhile pursuing? How do we know whether the suite of arcane species we have assembled for one group or another are really the ones we need to worry about? What is the evidence, and do we have it all at our fingertips, locally as well as nationally? Even if we have, do we know what we need to be doing about it?

I suspect the answers to some of these questions may be unpalatable to a lot of people, particularly those who like neat answers! Biodiversity Action Planning has produced a lot of activity, but in many areas, we most certainly haven't got the data into a useful order yet. Translating raw data into meaningful action is even harder, because so many unanswered questions remain about the life-histories of species and their inter-relationships, let alone about the effects of man's activities on them.

It is all quite crucial, though; that we don't take our eye off the ball of making sure that all our recording effort is actually useful. While Local Record Centres may be busy accumulating their hoard of data, the focus of those with the purse strings is ever more closely looking at the practical benefits of what they are funding. While biodiversity action plans may be a bit of a distraction, or even a frustrating irrelevance in the eyes of the field naturalist, they do represent a tangible link between the hard-nosed funding bureaucrat's interests, and the focusing of cash where we can best make use of it. How long the two interests will coincide is anybody's guess, but the writing may be on the wall for it being one of the highest priorities, and we had better make the best of it while we may.

In the meantime, NFBR's work remains to be completed. We can still do with helpers at all levels. In particular, the Council needs younger blood with plenty of ideas to assist the debate, and to take on some of the practical tasks. *If anyone else wants to be involved, let us know.* The forthcoming AGM is your opportunity. Perhaps we could even have a genuine election for a new Council member!

Happy recording.

**Trevor James**  
Chairman

## The NFBR Annual Conference and AGM

The rescheduled NFBR Conference and AGM will be held at the Birmingham & Midland Institute on the 8<sup>th</sup> March 2001. The subject is 'Biodiversity Data : Provision and Application'. Further details and booking forms will be sent out nearer the time. The contact is John Newbould ([newbould@aol.com](mailto:newbould@aol.com))

## Recorder 2000 - A Personal Review

The long awaited and rather delayed *Recorder 2000* - (*R2K*) - finally became available in August after its pre-launch event in 1999. Was it worth the wait?

Judging from the amount of traffic on:

- NBN Website's Recorder Forum (<http://www.nbn.org.uk/projects/rec2000>) and
- BRCNET discussion group ([BRCNET@egroups.com](mailto:BRCNET@egroups.com))

*R2K*'s reception has been rather mixed - from considerable accolade to downright hostility. Why, then, should the release of an update to good old/bad old *Recorder 3.3* (*R3.3*) provoke such a variety of responses? I suspect largely because it is young and different, and behaves a bit like a stropky teenager at times. Its name is the same, though, surprisingly for a programme called *Recorder*, the word 'record' is not in its lexicon. One can enter a 'taxon occurrence' but not a 'record'.

First, no way is it really an upgrade of *R3.3*, and it makes no pretence of being. It is a whole new programme, with new and sometimes unfamiliar ways of doing things. Many of the things it can do couldn't be done in *R3.3* and, for the time being, *vice versa*. Most of those who have welcomed *R2K* with open arms are new to *Recorder*. It is mostly us old lag *R3.3* users who are proving difficult to convince that this upstart programme might just well be the answer to what has been wrong with biological recording in Britain for the last few decades, and I think it will be.

In short, it can talk to the outside world. Its accessibility to external software is *R2K*'s real strength. At long last our *Recorder* data becomes transparent to other software, which was never possible with bad old AREV. Users can easily (...well, fairly easily) build their own reports etc. and, if they're really good, build their own add-ins. More importantly, these can be circulated over the web for others to use. A small library of additional features and downloads is already building up on the *Recorder* web-site. *R2K* is *modular* - that means special add-ins to deal with, for example, marine site data, veteran

trees, butterfly monitoring transects and the myriad other ways naturalists gather data should soon be or are already on stream. JNCC is, hopefully, listening to its customers and working out what special reports, add-ins etc., we all want, (especially the ones that will get us back to where we already are in *R3.3*!).

This openness comes at some cost. The specification of machine needed to run *R2K* at anything like an efficient speed is way in excess of the mid-90s machine needed for *R3.3*. *R2K* requires lots of RAM and hard disk space (the programme and the Access 97 files it produces are enormous), and a damn good clock speed if you don't want to spend time watching the hourglass on its endless turning.

One reason for some of the hostility has been that JNCC seem to have released it before the programme was good and ready. A fair number of bugs (only some of them entomological) have wriggled their way into the release version, which they are now working urgently on to remedy. Many already have been. There has already been a maintenance release on the web and, to be fair, there is a widget in the programme to e-mail any error messages to JNCC to help them work out appropriate fixes. This is something that most commercial software is not humble enough to include. It is however, a shame that more trialing was not undertaken prior to *R2K*'s release, with users using their own datasets. This comes from someone who downloaded various trial versions of the software, and never found time to put them through the wringer. It is very easy for me to be clever with hindsight.

The glitches vary from insignificant annoyances - for example, the 'close' button on open windows is forever greyed out, even though it works perfectly normally. This is the result of a bug in *Delphi* in which it is developed. Other more fundamental problems are being addressed between JNCC and the software developers. Some forms of data entry are also a bit clumsy, and a good bit slower than *R3.3*. The latest *Recorder* newsletter tells us that JNCC are also addressing this area of functionality with some urgency.

It is just about possible, with quite a lot of shenanigans, to get one's data across from existing *R3.3* datasets (*via* an update to *R3.4*) into *R2K*. The first release version of the translation programme can however *seriously* damage your data. Unfortunately, this is the version that is included on the installation CD ROM. To be fair it does give a serious health warning on the accompanying 'readme' file, and this is stressed on the *Recorder* website too. A second version is already there for download.

The main species dictionary, claimed to be derived from *R3.3* but in fact very much modified, and some of the ways the programme deals with it, are, to be frank, a bit of a pig's breakfast. This needs to be addressed by a combination of some reprogramming, and a revamp of much of the dictionary itself. This was, in any case, well overdue in *R3.3*. The future of this area of the NBN is the responsibility of the Natural History Museum. The programme can deal with multiple taxon checklists, one of its real strengths and also, sometimes, one of its more frustrating features. Examples of problems (unfortunately undetectable) include the transmogrification of the grayling butterfly into a fish or the redshank bird into a plant when entering data *via* English names. I'm assured these are being fixed in the next update. The white butterflies have been genetically modified into plants in the *Ericaceae*. There has also been an unfortunate, if well meant, translation of every initial 'L'. for any species' author's name to Linnaeus - for example, *Segestria bavarica* C.Linnaeus Koch. Whoops!

### **So - what's new and really good about *R2K*?**

Well, an awful lot actually.

First - it's part of the NBN and will eventually let everyone share data with others and see how theirs fits into the bigger picture. It will lead, at long last, to outflows of information from those current black holes in the conservation agencies, from BRC, the LRCs and the myriad of local and regional natural history societies. Many of these have long gobbled up our records and output little other than dots on maps. I've already

mentioned its transparency to other software - to spreadsheets, GIS and databases. Incidentally, beware - the use of *Access 2000* rather than *Access 97* with *R2K* can seriously damage your data. **Never** let *Access2K* update your *R2K* data. So much more has now become possible because data can be shared between applications. This accessibility to other programmes must not, however, be allowed to remain a substitute for adequate reporting facilities within the programme itself. These are currently pretty limited, although the latest *R2K* newsletter says this is also being addressed. Limited they may be, but they are very flexible and very neat to use. I remember the sighs of admiration from the audience when Stuart Ball demonstrated some of the report formatting at the pre-launch at the Natural History Museum. Those bells and whistles are all there and usable with experimentation, but are, sadly, currently undocumented. This is another indication of the rather unfortunate premature release of the programme.

*R2K* at last allows data to be entered *via* a map. JNCC is negotiating wonderfully cheap-rate raster map tiles from the O.S. The potential to be able to say "I recorded that beetle ... <mouse-click> ... there, at the junction between those two rides" and get a completely accurate grid reference, not subject to the inaccuracies of human grid reference estimation, is really great. This should prevent future occurrences of things like the pillwort growing 30 km out into the North Atlantic (*vide* the NBN map *via* the Gateway). The NBN certainly encourages you to clean up your data. *R2K*'s own mapping is a peculiar halfway house between PLOT5 and a GIS. Its sophistication invites one to expect more of it than it can actually do. For example, I'd *love* to change my records from an invisible dull purple! But it's really cool to be able to drag 'n' drop the entire contents of a county-wide survey onto a map and see it instantly mapped against a quarter-inch O.S. backdrop. This is a part of the programme that *R3.3* lags like me will really like, and would repay further development to bribe us all to come on board.

I think I have worked out now what I can and can't do with the programme, and what I'd like the programme to be able to do in the

future. I've passed on a myriad of ideas and suggestions, and a good few criticisms, across to JNCC. Inexplicably they e-mailed those suggestions along to all and sundry, so you may already have had a copy! No doubt I'm wrong in my interpretation for some of the things I think it can't do. In some cases, I should really have R.T.F.M. Except for its report formatter, *R2K* has excellent on-line help and a good manual available for printout straight off the CD. In others, I, along with other users, have identified some real glitches that are now being addressed, or have come up with ideas that might usefully be incorporated.

**Will I be using *R2K* for personal and professional work? Well...yes and no.**

- Yes? I'm already experimenting hard with it. I've managed to copy 70,000 Lincolnshire beetle records across into it to play with, and I'm working on getting English Nature's Invertebrate Site Register into a decent enough state to push it across. Another great strength of *R2K* is that it forces you into very good data entry practices, but one's former short-cuts in *R3.3* catch up with you when re-reading data for the transfer process!
- No? On the home front I'm urging patience. I am waiting for a maintenance upgrade or two and a few more standard reports before recommending that the seventeen users of *R3.3* in our

dispersed Lincolnshire Naturalists' Union Recorder Group switches to *R2K* for real. This will allow us to use the data that matters and leave behind poor old *AREV* for good.

Be patient with *R2K*. Some of the criticisms have been really unfair, others, justified. Think back to all the grizzles about *AREV Recorder* back in the early 90s. All the things it couldn't do. All the bugs, or all the bugs in every new version of *Windows*, when it comes to it. I put in over 80 pages of comment and suggestion about *R3.3* and its predecessors to poor old Stuart and have now got up to 30 pages with *R2K*. It took 15 years to develop *R3.3* from its ancestor, the Invertebrate Site Register, and *R2K*, like any bit of software, is now going through the same process.

I'm sure it will be worth it.

**Roger Key - variously:**

first and foremost - amateur naturalist and wildlife recorder

exec member, NFBR

beetle Recorder and botanical project Recorder co-ordinator, Lincolnshire Naturalists' Union

scheme organiser, BRC scheme for Cleroidea and Heteromera

invertebrate ecologist and Invertebrate Site Register custodian (England), English Nature

## The National Biodiversity Network Trust

I expect you are all familiar with the basic ideas behind the creation of a National Biodiversity Network, but just to make sure....

The UK has a long tradition of wildlife observation, which the members of the NFBR are ensuring will continue and flourish in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is often said that this tradition goes back to the days of the Victorian naturalists and their desire to see a 'well labelled world'. (I always think this is somewhat akin to medical doctors and their ability to diagnose and name maladies, not necessarily understand the cause or have a cure, just to have a handy name, preferably Latin, to reassure the patient that all is well).

To an extent, this link to the Victorians is true, but I think it is important to recognise that this paints a somewhat quaint picture that is very far from the present reality of biological recording. I guess from the sixties onwards (if a general date has to be set), the gathering of field data has been a well organised and professional endeavour carried forward by enthusiastic, well-trained and well-informed volunteers, experts in their self-chosen specialities. The CCBR report on the subject gave a figure of 60,000 people actively engaged in this activity, although the suspicion is that this is an under estimate. Data on the nation's biodiversity are held by many separate