

NATIONAL FEDERATION FOR BIOLOGICAL RECORDING

NEWSLETTER 3

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The Editor welcomes articles (line diagrams, sorry no photographs), short news items,
reviews and comment.

Material for Newsletter 4, April 1987 to the Editor by Friday 6th March.

NEWS

NCC/NGO Data Handling Group

A 'Data Handling Group' was set up in September by NCC and Wildlife Link as one of a series of working groups to implement the strategy in 'Nature Conservation in Great Britain'. The Data Handling Group's general terms of reference are: a) to exchange information on all member groups' current and future programs to assist in developing complementary action, b) the development of policy. Specific terms of reference are a) To review the collection, storage and processing of ecological data on habitats and species b) To endeavour to facilitate better means of exchange of ecological data.

The group now has representatives from NCC, WWF-UK, Marine Conservation Society, RSNC, RSPB, Mammal Soc, JCCBI, NFBR, ITE, BRC, Linnean Soc, National Trust. The group's first full meeting was in December.

Linnean Society Biological Survey Working Group

A widely based group set up in response to 'The Need for a Review of Biological Recording in the British Isles' prepared for the Linnean Society in October 1985 by the then Steering Committee for the NFBR. The Group is currently addressing the following problems. 1) survey of existing and potential demand for biological records. 2) need for a funding strategy for biological recording, 3) computer and information technology developments, 4) national strategy for biological recording. The findings of the working party will be published in a report which has reached its first draft.

At the July meeting of the Group the NFBR presented 'An Interim Policy Statement' which asked the Linnean Society to support the objectives of the NFBR. The short term objectives are fund raising for 1) an Administrative Fund, 2) the employment of an executive secretary and 3) a review of biological recording in the UK. The Linnean Society endorsed these objectives.

Environmental Impact Assessment - Any Impact on Environmental Recording?

Government proposals issued in April covering the 'European Directive on Environmental Assessment' suggest that Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is unlikely to come into the work of Local Planning Authorities. Hence statutory requirements will not increase the demand for biological records at a local level. Member states have to comply with the European Directive by 2 July 1988. For further details contact Planning and Land Use Policy Division 4, Room C13/06, Department of the Environment, 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 3EB. Separate proposals were issued for Scotland and Wales.

The directive provides two lists of development projects. Annex 1 covers major developments such as power stations, radioactive and toxic waste disposal installations, motorways, all of which require the developer to prepare an EIA, but not all are subject to approval under the Town and Country Planning Acts and they will be the subject of further Government proposals.

Annex 2 is a more extensive list, including afforestation and agricultural development of semi-natural land, for which EIA may be required at the government's discretion. Annex 2 development projects are covered by existing planning legislation and while encouraging good practice the government has no desire to increase the burden of control over industry.

The Dyfed Invertebrate Group

To encourage interest in the relatively little-studied invertebrate fauna of the old counties of Carmarthen, Pembroke and Cardigan, the 'Dyfed Invertebrate Group' has been established. Field meetings have been arranged at interesting localities and a regular newsletter is in production. Residents or visitors are most welcome to attend any field meetings or receive the newsletter. Please contact: Dyfed Invertebrate Group, Nature Conservancy Council, Plas Gogerddan, Aberystwyth, Dyfed SY23 3EE.

Recording for the Record

Who is paying for what?

Consultant R.N. Young has been grant aided by Countryside Commission to examine Hampshire's 1984/5 air photographs and has identified a number of features of environmental interest including a large number of new 'habitat sites' which will be field surveyed next year. Enquiries to: The Landscape Overview, Moretonhampstead, Devon TQ13 8NL. For Tyne and Wear James Davies and Partners have been commissioned by NCC to draw together existing biological information and fill in the gaps. The result will be a document for voluntary bodies and local authorities. To quote 'Urban Wildlife News' the 'NCC recognises the need for a proper foundation of systematic data if the Strategy for Nature Conservation is to be elaborated with confidence at district level. West Yorkshire Ecological Advisory Service has started a three year habitat re-survey of West Yorkshire to identify and evaluate changes since the NCC's initial habitat survey of the late 1970s. The project is being jointly funded by NCC, Countryside Commission and local authorities.

Recorders and Records Centres

In a recent Museums Documentation Association survey of some 1,000 museums in the south-east, two museums stated that they were using computers for biological recording and seventeen intended to do so.

Caithness Biological Records Centre has been formed with MSC funding for a staff of five. The initial objective of the records centre was the collation of all existing natural history information for Caithness District. 1985 saw a 100 site freshwater invertebrate survey and summer 1986 was scheduled for a terrestrial invertebrate survey. Contact the first BRC in Highland Region at: Caithness Museum Service, Bruce Building, Sinclair Terrace, Wick, Caithness KW1 5AB.

Please send details of surveys, staff appointments and other recording related items. The NFBR Newsletter relies on your contributions to achieve a useful picture of what is going on in biological recording.

CONFERENCES

A CONSORT OF CONFERENCES?

Between April 1986 and April 1987 those whose active concern includes biological recording and computers will have stretched their travel budgets to get to five relevant conferences. It is hoped that all the conferences have been or will be well attended and that the information exchanged, contacts made and development initiatives proposed, will be widely communicated to the British natural history and conservation community as a whole.

BOOK NOW FOR ..

NFBR Annual Conference 1987
BIOLOGICAL RECORDING: THE PRODUCTS
22-24 April 1987 University of Bristol, Churchill Hall

Biological recording is an essential component of effective environmental conservation, planning, research and education. The NFBR's 1987 conference concentrates on the products of biological recording. Full details enclosed. Booking forms available from the NFBR Treasurer, address on the front of newsletter.

CONFERENCE REPORTS

NFBR Inaugural Conference 1986
BIOLOGICAL RECORDING IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE
15-16 April 1986 Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge

The report of the conference is now available, price £6 (£4.50 NFBR members) + postage from the NFBR Treasurer (address on the front of newsletter). Detailed summaries of the following seminar topics are presented: the need for biological recording; recent work by BSBI, ITE and NCC; priority taxa; created habitats; hidden data; biological recording handbook; involvement in planning; threats to organisms; species names, codes and vernacular; habitat classification; Data Protection Act; consultancy work.

Linnean Society Computer Applications Group
SOFTWARE FOR CHECKLISTS, MAPPING AND BIOLOGICAL RECORDING
8 May 1986 at the Linnean Society of London

Some thirty people attended the afternoon, which started with three short talks followed by a demonstration session emphasising the practical approach of the meeting. Dr Allkin (Southampton University) and Mr Winfield (DAFS, Edinburgh) presented ALICE taxonomic software working on an Olivetti M24 under PC-DOC. Mr Nicholson (MAPICS Ltd, UCL) presented MAPICS mapping software on an IBM PC, under PC-DOS. Colin Plant (Passmore Edwards Museum) presented BIORECORD biological recording package on an APRICOT under MS-DOS. The Group is open to all; contact Prof. F.A. Bisby, Secretary Computer Applications Group, The Linnean Society of London, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1V 0LQ.

Institute of Environmental Sciences
COMPUTERS IN CONSERVATION
22 May 1986 London

The conference was introduced by Mike Pugh-Thomas, Chairman of IES and was chaired by Michael Usher of York University. Approximately 100 delegates attended. The first speaker, Ian Baugh of NCC described the development and use of computer systems in NCC, dealing mainly with a site-related data-base to cover NNRS and SSSIs, which currently number 197 and 4497 respectively.

Bernard Chandler of Hatfield Polytechnic then described the integration of national and local site records for Local Nature Conservation Trusts. Micro-computers are now installed with 23 of the 46 trusts. It is hoped that a further 10 will be installed this financial year. A detailed publication on the system developed at Hatfield for trusts was due to be published in June 1986. Details from B. Chandler, Director, Environmental Studies, Hatfield Polytechnic, Hatfield, Herts.

Clare Lukehurst, Director of the Countryside Research Unit, Brighton Polytechnic, described the collection, storage and retrieval of data for ecological survey using as her example the Sussex Land Use Inventory and the West Sussex Habitat Change Survey. The Countryside Research Unit produces an Annual Report. Paul Harding BRC (ITE Monks Wood) described the national BRC - a computerised database on the occurrence of species in the British Isles and how its data can be applied to nature conservation. Inadequate funding, both past and present, and uncertainty for the future were identified as obstacles to BRC achieving its full potential as a data resource for conservationists.

David Mackinder of IUCN Conservation Monitoring Unit at Kew described progress with establishing a variety of data-bases for international wildlife conservation, such as the Protected Areas data-base and the CITES data-base. All the speakers and Michael Rometil (Secretary IES) formed a panel of experts for an open forum which discussed many topics including confidentiality of records and habitat classification.

Council of Europe
THIRD COLLOQUY ON COMPUTER APPLICATIONS IN THE FIELD OF NATURE CONSERVATION
Strasbourg, 4-5 November 1986

A two day colloquy with presentations and open forum discussions on three main themes:

1. Biotopes and geographically oriented data-bases
2. Taxonomic data-bases
3. Biological data-bases for land management

A useful exchange of information and ideas between delegates from over 15 countries and international organisations. Positive points for action were that the Council of Europe would update and revise its Catalogue of Data-bases in the Field of Nature Conservation during 1987. Secondly, Prof. Heywood (Reading) would chair a taxonomic working group to develop criteria and methodologies for lists of standard accepted names of taxa, primarily of use in national and international legislation. A fourth colloquy is planned for spring 1988. Full report of Colloquy recommendations in next newsletter.

REVIEWS

Gaining Momentum: An Analysis of the Role and Performance of Local Authorities in Nature Conservation. David Tyldesley WWF/BANC Pisces Publications 1986 96pp 3 figs 7 tables 6 pls Paperback ISBN 0-9508245-4-2 £5.00 including p&p. Pisces Publications, Brasenose Farm, Eastern Bypass, Oxford OX4 2QZ

An essential report for all those developing the use of biological records by local authorities. The book is based on a comprehensive questionnaire survey of local authorities (at county and district level), NCC county officers, and Local Nature Conservation Trust conservation officers. The individual questions of the questionnaire were not intended to elicit great detail on any one aspect of nature conservation. However the analysis of the results is illuminating and should enable biological recorders to gain an overview of how local authorities might be advised of the biological significance of land within their jurisdiction.

24% of district councils when asked, "Who would you normally consult for observations and additional nature conservation advice on new developments?" replied that they consulted organisations other than Local Nature Conservation Trusts, County Councils and NCC. Let us hope that some of those 24% had involved local records centres. It is also noted that the "burden of providing the ever increasing demand for information and advice has fallen squarely on the shoulders of the county trusts", a fact which is reflected in the number of Local Nature Conservation Trusts as initiators of local records centre projects.

The report concludes with an impressive set of 56 recommendations aimed at local authorities, but also aimed at other bodies involved in the conservation process. It would have been nice to see a specific recommendation dealing with the advantages of local records centres because they are a potential focal point for survey or collation of biological information and its input into local authorities. The recommendations include many ideas which will increase the quality (comprehensiveness and validity) of the biological data sets used by local authorities and those advising them.

Recommendation 1, that DoE should issue a new and comprehensive circular about local authorities and nature conservation, has seen a replacement circular to 108/77, "Nature Conservation and the Planning System" submitted to Wildlife Link as a consultation draft. Furthermore, a report "Local Authorities and Wildlife" has been issued by twenty wildlife organisations.

Index of Biological Site Records for Essex, December 1986

Essex Biological Records Centres Publications No 4 ISBN-0-9501-781-5-2. £1.75 including p&p, available from Colchester and Essex Museum, 13 Ryegate Road, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1YG. Cash with orders less than £4.

Aimed at Essex planning authorities, societies, nature conservation bodies and other organisations concerned with assessing the biological value of a site. The index unifies the data holdings of seven organisations, proving the data storage principle that it doesn't matter where you keep something as long as you know where it is. Many counties could gain from establishing similar indices.

Sites are listed in strict numerical grid ref. order, with a supplementary alphabetic site name list cross-referencing to grid refs. Each grid ref. is followed by statuses (seven from SSSI to country park), a list of animal/plant groups recorded, the years in which each group was recorded, and, importantly, the initials of the organisation holding the data.

In some other counties 'Site Alert Maps' giving boundaries of sites of wildlife interest are provided for planning authorities for inclusion in local plans, development control maps and county landscape strategies. Both maps and indices can be ignored and it would be interesting to know which is generally more acceptable to planners, and if in Essex the Index has increased the consultation rate of data-holding organisations.

An Atlas of the Carabidae (Ground Beetles) of Northumberland and Durham

M.D. Eyre, M.L. Luff, S.G. Ball, Northumberland Biological Records Centre, The Hancock Museum, Barras Bridge, Newcastle upon Tyne, Special Publication No 2, 1986. ISBN 0-9509680-3-X. £5.50 including p&p.

Tetrad maps of 113 species with brief notes on each species. A good bibliography. A brave attempt at a local atlas for a less popular group which would have benefited from a little more data for mapping by tetrads, though records were received from a quarter of the tetrads.

Ladybirds in Dorset

A. Moon. Dorset Environmental Records Centre 1986. 24pp. 4 figs. 7 pls. ISBN 0-9511394-0-1. £2.75 including p&p from DERC, c/o Dorset County Museum, High West Street, Dorchester, Dorset.

The illustrated keys and drawings can be used to identify 28 of the 34 ladybird species recorded in Dorset. The book could be used as an identification guide to the commoner British ladybirds. Designed to encourage recording in Dorset, this publication is a nice addition to DERC's run of well-illustrated, short identification guides to the county's fauna. Due to the local scope of this book, no mention is made of the National Recording Scheme or the Cambridge Ladybird Survey which has national coverage. Details of the National Recording Scheme from BRC, Monds Wood, Abbots Ripton, Huntingdon Cambs PE17 2LS and the Cambridge Ladybird Survey, The Field Station (Genetics), 219D Huntingdon Road, Cambridge CB3 0DL.

ARTICLES

MSC - Most Surveys Completed

Recommendation nine of 'Gaining Momentum' is that local authorities "Explore the opportunities available through MSC schemes to employ specialist staff on a regular or temporary basis, particularly useful when establishing information about habitats".

Is MSC funding really a good way to employ a specialist? By its nature, MSC funding ensures that individual specialists can only be employed every other year; a sort of regular temporary employment. Should not other resources be found for the collection and interpretation of the records essential to conservation? The NFBR Newsletter invites comment on the impact and sensible use of MSC funding in biological recording.

From our December 1985 request for brief details of MSC involvement in biological recording, 18 out of 33 (55%) of replies reported using MSC staff for surveying or records centre work. The survey showed that considerably more MSC staff were involved in the collection and management of biological records than staff funded in other ways. Will there be enough non-MSC staff to use the products of MSC schemes? Many comprehensive surveys, such as county phase 1 habitat surveys, have depended solely on MSC personnel, while to cope with an increasing demand for site survey and management plan writing, county nature conservation trusts are often relying on MSC staff.

Surveyors and records centre staff may be locally out-numbered by 'field' teams who carry out the physical side of site management. Planning the work of these teams and monitoring its impact is a priority for the surveyors. Is sufficient information and biological expertise available to ensure the environmentally safe working of these teams? This is particular problem in some areas where MSC will fund scrub-bashing but not survey. The desire to involve many people with the local environment, give people useful employment experience, and take people off the unemployment register may push beyond our ability to generate useful site work through lack of survey resource,

It will be interesting to see the effect locally of UK2000, the new independent Community Programme Agency set up after the 1985 BCTV/Dartington Trust report for the DoE 'Work and the Environment' which plans to put more MSC staff into "greening the cities" and "making more of nature".

Leicestershire Museums Service - Ecological Sites Index

The background to the establishment by the Service of an Ecological Sites Databank is described in a paper by I.M. Evans on 'The Use of Local Biological Records Centres' published in the BCG Newsletter in 1985 (4:2, 53-58).

In January 1985 we set up on the County Council's mainframe computer (a Sperry 1100/72) an index to the Ecological Sites Databank using a Sperry package called MAPPER. The Index has a theoretical capacity of 1,000,000 lines of 132 characters. Each line summarises the observations made at one site at one time and enables the enquirer to locate in the Databank the documentary record of these observations. Individual sites may be represented in the Index by a number of lines, each of which relates to a significant addition to the information available on that site. A sample printout from the Index follows. It contains all those lines relating to sites in the parish of Shepshed for which information about birds is recorded.

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ECOLOGICAL SITES INDEX  I.M.EVANS.  JANUARY 1985                      5000322
LIVE DATA CAPTURE FILE - District 2
*DIS1                      HABITAT INTEREST
#YEAR  SITE NAME          U.S.GRID  11223344 11223344 YEAR BY  E S  SOURCE  P  NOTES
=====
222 HIGH GROUND          SH484 165  TPFDFC  PHAV    1980 PAE P  12221002032
222 INGLEBERRY ROCK      SH489 173  SKGR    PHAV    1980 PAE P  12221002035
222 SCRUB                SH483 169  FS      PHLPAY  1980 PAE P  12221002036
222 SCRUB                SH480 170  FS      PHAVLPH 1980 PAE P  12221002039
222 WHITE HORSE WOOD     SH468 184  FDTF    PHAV    1980 PAE ?  12221002052  EVALUATION ?P/D
222 IVLS ROAD           SH477 170  GHSRFS  PHAVMA  1980 PAE C S 12221002054 P SEE PHOTO 1006004,005+011
222 MURLEY QUARRY        SH476 178  RUGBFS  AV      1980 PAE ?  12221002056  EVALUATION ?P/D
222 QUARRY DISUSED       SH475 179  RUMFFS  AVPH    1980 PAE P  12221002057
222 HOME COVERT W. SETT  SH489 186  FM      PHAVLPH 1980 PAE ?  12221002058  DISUSED SETT;EVALUATION ?P/D
222 HOME COVERT EAST     SH492 191  FM      PHAV    1980 PAE ?  12221002061  EVALUATION ?P/D
222 WOODLAND             SH495 194  FD      PHAV    1980 PAE P  12221002062
222 HOOK HILL WOOD       SH455 191  FM      PHAV    1980 PAE ?  12221002068  EVALUATION ?P/D
222 POOL                 SH454 187  WI      ALAV    1980 PAE U  12221002070
222 LONGLEIFF PLANTAIN   SH491 172  RUMFM  PHAV    1980 PAE ?  12221002071 P SEE PHOTO 1006006+007;EVALUATION ?
222 SPINNEY              SH459 189  FD      PHAV    1980 PAE D  12221002100

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An explanation of the field structure of the record may be of interest to those who like to get down to the 'nuts and bolts' level.

Field 1	DIST/PAR	numerical code for the nine districts in the county and their constituent parishes, devised by the County Planning and Transportation Department
Field 2	SITE NAME	specific or general name
Field 3	O.S. GRID	6-figure grid ref. to nominal centre of site
Field 4	HABITAT	four 2-letter codes indicating habitats present on the site, in order of relative importance
Field 5	INTEREST	four 2-letter codes indicating plant or animal groups referred to in source. PH is the code for flowering plants and ferns
Field 6	YEAR	year of survey or observation
Field 7	BY	individual or organisation responsible for survey or observation
Field 8	E	evaluation of site; P - parish, D - district, C - county levels
Field 9	S	conservation status of site; S - S.S.S.I.
Field 10	SOURCE	source reference number (see below)
Field 11	P	indicates if site was photographed
Field 12	NOTES	additional information in freetext format

The 11-digit source reference number looks cumbersome, but breaks down into five components, which direct the enquirer from the complete Databank to a specific note. The system is a hierarchical one and as an example the source reference number of the first line of the printout, 12221002100, breaks down as follows.

- 1. the second major section of the Databank, containing information arranged by district and parish, as opposed to that, for example, arranged by river system, which is an alternative for aquatic sites
- 2.22 district and parish code
- 10 tenth file of the 99 allocated to the parish of Shepshed; files 10-19 accommodate all current general survey data for the parish; 20-59 data relating to specific important sites eg. S.S.S.I., etc.
- 02 second document in that file
- 100 100th note in that document

The definitions of precisely what constitutes a document or note are part of an operating manual for the Databank; there is a companion manual for the Index, which explains how to code up survey reports and operate MAPPER.

MAPPER is an interactive information retrieval package, which is operated from the Ecological Site Databank's own terminal, but may be accessed by authorised users from any of the Museum Service's 24 terminals. It allows simultaneous searches or sorts on up to five fields. As a hypothetical example, it could search for all ponds (field 4), with amphibian interest (field 5), in a named district (field 1), surveyed since 1980 (field 6), for which photographs exist (field 11). It could then sort these by grid reference (field 3) or by evaluation (field 8) or, for ready access to the source, by source reference number (field 10). It will then print out the result.

In the 27 months since the Index became operational, five contract employees, some part-time and some full-time, have worked on the sorting, filing and numbering up of sources and inputting data. The operating manuals took several weeks to compile, but a new employee now requires about two days to get familiar with the system. The contracts have been 50% funded by N.C.C., who increased their grant for 1986-87 so that we were able to employ one person full-time for the whole year. So far some 10,000 lines have been inputted. These cover most of the currently available information on 80 parishes, and all the 500 or so badger setts in the county. On this basis we predict that the total record will amount to at least 40,000 lines.

To give some idea of the 'information traffic' the Index is assisting us to cope with, we received during the twelve months October 1985 - September 1986 357 ecological consultations of sufficient substance to require follow-up in the form of reports, letters or copies of information in the Databank.

If any members of NFBR have queries about the system I should be pleased to attempt to answer them in correspondence or, given a little notice, show them it in operation.

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