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Recorder News

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Date for the diary, etc.

From the Chair

BRISC exists in order to encourage and support the recording community in Scotland, and it is therefore with the greatest interest that we have been following the development of the new software *Recorder 2000*. As readers may know, this is now promised for release in early August, and regarding marketing the most recent thinking by JNCC is that the package will be made available to users through a system of franchise. At the time of writing, the conditions of the franchise and cost of the software, which also depends on the level of support required, are still to be sorted out, but BRISC has registered an interest in applying for such a franchise. This also fits in

well with our proposal to conduct, in collaboration with LRCs, a series of *Recorder 2000* demonstrations around Scotland this autumn, to be followed by proper training courses in 2001-2. It all depends on whether we manage to land the grants we have applied for to allow this to go ahead. So watch this space.

In addition to the *Recorder 2000* demos, BRISC hopes to run a couple of seminars for biological data managers later this financial year, in particular a basic course in GIS such as “The next steps after installation”, and “setting up a satellite system of recorders”. Costs will have to cover expenses of venue and speakers. Bring your own lunch.

As far as training in species identification is concerned, BRISC feels that this is best done at the local level, through the LRCs, using local experts. Experience has shown that people are reluctant to travel great distances for this kind of event, and many LRCs are already running their own programmes. In addition, Kindrogan Field Centre, situated in Perthshire’s beautiful countryside, also offers a wide range courses in species identification. I had occasion to attend an event there in May this year and can thoroughly recommend it. To see what is on offer, visit their website at <http://www.econet.org.uk/kindrogan>

I know that farmers and landowners often get a bad press regarding conservation practices. While there are undoubtedly many good reasons for this, one should not overlook that there are also very many examples of exemplary practices and positive action by landmanagers for wildlife

conservation. I have been fortunate enough to visit several such places in recent months, the latest being in Fife just a couple of days ago. This was Gilston, farmed by Edward Baxter, also great nephew to the celebrated Miss Evelyn Baxter, co-author of *The Birds of Scotland* (1953).

Edward's passion is the grey partridge, which was practically none existent (1-2 pairs) on the land when he inherited the estate on the death of his father back in the 1980s. The estate's game books, however, showed that this had not always been the case and that up to 120 grey partridges had been shot annually in the days of his grandfather at the turn of the century. Edward happens also to have an interest in game shooting and took it as a challenge to bring back the grey partridge. The Game Conservancy was consulted on how to set about it and much work and careful planning has since succeeded in bringing back considerable numbers (28 pairs on 800 hectares this year). Beetlebanks (long strips of 6 foot wide grassy banks) were created where hedges had been grubbed up in the 1960-70s to enlarge fields, remaining hedges were gapped up, new ones planted, conservation headlands introduced round the cereal fields, and a minimum of chemicals used elsewhere. Rules for set-a-sides were carefully applied to create the maximum benefit to wildlife.

The estate has of course to be run for profit, but everything is done with a thought for game and other wildlife. Predator control (crows, foxes and mustelids) is practiced to protect the ground nesting partridge and consequently hares abound. Three large ponds are home to several species of duck, trout, frogs, toads, damselflies, and a serious wetland has been created through blocking all drains in a damp field. In winter this holds large numbers of snipe, and many other pairs of birds for the rest of the year. Wild flowers are encouraged for the food source they provide, no nitrate and no lead shot is allowed anywhere near the water, and various researchers have projects under way in different parts of the estate. Special grain mixtures have even been planted at the request of one researcher on yellowhammers.

The whole place is carefully tended, full of bird song and the buzzing of insects, and there is a feeling of rich abundance which it is truly delightful. Edward's comments to this were telling: 'It is a great mistake to think that things will turn out right if just left alone' and all evidence around the estate bears this out. Miss Evelyn Baxter would have every reason to be very

proud of her nephew, could she see what he has achieved.

Anne-Marie Smout

LRC news -

CARSE has recently produced a very attractive Information Pack. Apart from information about the record centre and who to contact, the pack contains the latest issue of the newsletter 'Bark & Byte' and a number of interesting surveys. The Natural Garden Survey has a useful checklist of commoner species to encourage reluctant and new recorders to start sending in records; there is a Freshwater Mammal Survey 2000; a Frog and Toad survey; a Red and Grey Squirrel Survey; a Wetland Wild Flower Survey; as well as checklists of local butterflies and dragonflies. Everything in the pack is handsomely produced and a pleasure to handle. It should greatly encourage people to take part. The pack is available from

Lesley Brown, CARSE, Smith Art Gallery and Museum, Dumbarton Road, Stirling.

*

A new Local Records Centre for North East

Scotland – In the past, biological records for what used to be called Grampian have been collected by the Zoology Department of Aberdeen University and others, and housed at the Conoco Centre, Tillydrone Avenue, Aberdeen. However, as part of a LRC pilot project, let by the Wildlife Trusts for the National Biodiversity Network, a funding partnership has been formed to set up a fully functioning local records centre for North-east Scotland, based at Aberdeenshire Council Offices at Inverurie. Andrew Ferguson has been appointed to take this exciting and demanding project forward. We wish Andy every luck and look forward to working with him and seeing the new centre flourish. The address of the new centre is

Andrew Ferguson, Recorder, NE Scotland
BRC c/o Aberdeenshire Council, Gordon
House, Blackhall Road, Inverurie,
Aberdeenshire AB51 3WA

*

Fife Nature has also produced one of their traditional survey packs for year 2000. This contains a colourful information leaflet about Fife Nature, its objectives, services, data quality and how to become involved, a newsletter (no 14); a Garden Butterfly Records Scheme 2000 inviting 500 enthusiasts to mark down all the species and

numbers seen in their garden on a more or less daily basis; three further surveys on squirrels, mushrooms (Birch Polypore, Dryad's Saddle, Fly Agaric, and Candle-snuff Fungus), and most usefully, two simple identification keys, one to Woodlice in Fife, the other to Scottish Grasshoppers. The pack can be obtained from

Fife Nature, Fife House, Glenrothes, Fife
KY10 3DZ

AMS

Shetland and Orkney; Current and Future Projects'

Orkney BRC – Ross Andrew

Presentation given at BRISC Annual Conference and AGM, 26 February 2000.

(The introduction to this joint slide presentation was given by Roger Riddington, Shetland BRC, see *BRISC Recorder News* No 37 for details).

Background

Orkney was chosen as one of the first four pilot areas in Scotland to produce a Local Biodiversity Action Plan. As part of this process, in the course of producing Plan documents, an Audit, and the development of a Community Biodiversity Programme, the requirement for a local BRC was recognised.

The partnership process

Orkney BRC is a partnership, which is building knowledge by sharing information about the distribution of Orkney plants, animals and habitats. The lead partner is the Education Department of Orkney Islands Council; the other partners are the Orkney Field Club, Orkney Enterprise (the local Enterprise Company), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Scottish Natural Heritage. The partnership process offers advantages in that costs can be shared. Also, without the Records Centre, no single partner would have had access to all the data. It was decided from the earliest stage that no one partner would host Orkney BRC. A small office has been taken in the centre of Kirkwall to establish a distinct identity for the project. After completion of the establishment phase, by which time the role of the Centre should be more clearly understood within the community, the Centre will be housed in the new Orkney Library and will be operated as an integral component of the Library and Archives Service.

Funding

The project budget over the three year establishment phase is £143,000. Orkney BRC would not have been possible without 50% European Regional Development Fund Objective One funding. Remaining costs are met to varying degrees by the partners. The largest individual partner contributors to the project fund 12.6% of the total, with 11% having been externally fundraised after the project start to meet additional costs for volunteer recorder training and support.

Use of the Centre

The Centre office provides a unique focus for wildlife recording interests and activities. In addition to the computers, software and associated peripherals required to operate the Centre, there is bench space, a small library (many of the works unavailable elsewhere in Orkney), compound and stereo microscopes, and the beginnings of working reference collections for under-recorded plants and animals. Various groups and committees use the Centre for evening and weekend meetings, including demonstrations of bryophyte and macro moth identification. (Members of the moth recording group are shown using the Centre microscope to look at genitalia preparations for two readily confused species, the Common Rustic (*Hoplodrina blanda*) and the Lesser Common Rustic (*Mesapamea secalella*).

The Centre Database

The project has been given an ambitious target within the current establishment phase of inputting 120,000 biological records from scratch within the *Recorder* database. The database currently contains c.56,000 records, the bulk of which are for vascular plants (c. 27,000) and birds (c.18,000), with much smaller holdings for bryophytes, spiders and caddis flies. All of these records have been manually inputted. The final database target, however, can only be reached via the electronic import of data held by RSPB, JNCC and others. As part of this process, the new Recorder 2000 software is awaited. After electronic import, the database is expected to contain c.70,000 bird records, 27,000 vascular plant records and 32,000 marine records.

Communications

Orkney BRC has a monthly column in the local newspaper, *The Orcadian* (circulation 11,000), and has full colour leaflets describing its aims and operation. Long-term surveys relating to the needs

of the Orkney Biodiversity Action Plan have been launched to raise awareness and provide a focussed means for the community to contribute useful records. The Orkney House Sparrow Survey is based on the BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey model, requiring weekly peak Sparrow counts from gardens and backyards. Illustrated information fact packs with full instructions, recording form and s.a.e. are made available on demand or can be down-loaded from the Orkney BRC website. The website links to all BRC partner sites, and as part of this process, an Orkney Field Club website has also been created. There are also links to the newly created Community Biodiversity Project website.

Recorder training

An ambitious programme of seven introductory identification weekend courses for under-recorded groups of plants and animals, funded by the Natural Pioneers programme of BTCV, will start in April. The courses are linked to recording requirements in four study sites on the West Mainland of Orkney. Experienced tutors, all authorities in their own fields, will lead the courses, which will deal with bryophytes, spiders, lichens, mammals, freshwater algae, moths and butterflies and sedges and rushes. The aim is to build the local identification skills base for under-recorded plants and animals and encourage collaborative site recording by self-supporting groups of volunteers.

Forging links

The Centre has been actively involved with the Orkney Science Festival. Last summer a joint trip to the uninhabited island of Eynhallow highlighted volunteer recording opportunities, working with Aberdeen University Zoology Department. Local bird ringers will contribute to the Department's continuous and long-running study of the breeding ecology of the Fulmar, started in 1950. There is also the potential for volunteers to assist with other aspects of recording and monitoring the island wildlife.

The Stromness campus of Heriot-Watt University are partners in the Orkney Biodiversity Action Plan process and have established a comprehensive fish database for Orkney waters as well as collating Orkney's extensive marine records.

Orkney College, as part of the University of the Highlands and Islands, has links with Dunstaffnage Marine Laboratory and, through them, with the Scottish Association of Marine

Science. The College currently offers a BSc course in Sustainable Development and is hosting a number of the planned identification weekends in its newly built laboratories.

End product

By the end of the current ERDF Objective One co-funding period, the end product will include: a permanent BRC resource as part of the OIC Library and Archive service, a database of 120,000+ biological records within *Recorder 2000* linked to a Geographic Information System, a CD ROM gazetteer of Orkney species and habitats, an updated species checklist for all taxa, an enhanced skills base for volunteer wildlife recorders, a permanent website (providing news, information, surveys and user feedback) and the start of a *Recorder 2000* satellite system for vice county recorders.

The future

Beyond the establishment phase there is a requirement for more baseline terrestrial habitat data, focussed site recording, development of a more formalised partnership, establishing service level agreements with major data users and the continuing requirement to work towards and maintain accreditation standards of BRISC and the future NBN.

The presentation finished from the viewpoint of purely personal interest with views of the Great Red Sedge caddis, *Phryganea grandis* and its known larval habitats. The usual habitat for this species is rich, weedy ponds. Although widespread, it is local in the UK, never recorded in large numbers. The exception is Orkney (as described in Wallace (1991), *A Review of the Trichoptera of Great Britain*, NCC). Wasdale Loch is one of the larval habitats in Orkney recorded in my surveys of 1986 and 1987, but there is little or no emergent or fringing vegetation more typically associated with the species. Why is it so abundant and widespread in Orkney? Only sustained recording work can begin to shed light on the distribution and abundance of this and so many other little-known Orkney freshwater macro-invertebrates.

Ross Andrew, Biodiversity Officer,
Orkney BRC, Anchor House, 10 Bridge
Street, Kirkwall, KW15 1HR

Editor's note:

I have had a letter commenting on the impression given in the last newsletter, and possibly reinforced by the above article, that the Orkney Record Centre is 'brand new'. I think that the current article describes a new 'phase' of recording activity in Orkney and any 'problems' which may well occur during such an important process should not be taken as denigrating in any way the efforts which have gone before. BRISC knows that the Orkney Field Club has been recording since 1959, has operated as a biological records centre since pre-1990, and was accredited by BRISC in 1997. Many areas are envious of the local support for recording that the OFC has maintained over many years.

DM

HELP! - Do you have the skills to help us build an innovative and stimulating website?

The past couple of years have served as a gestation period for a proposed BRISC website, a development which is an important one for the organisation, both in terms of increasing the awareness of BRISC among a wider audience, and allowing more effective communication between members in more remote parts of Scotland. The latter is particularly relevant to those of us living in the Highlands and Islands, where transport costs and logistics mean that attendance of meetings, conferences etc. is difficult. Ross Spalding, recently-retired from the BRISC committee, started the BRISC website rolling, and we are now looking for someone with some previous experience of websites to finalise the layout and setting up of the site. The time required for this may not be too daunting for someone with such experience, and this is why we are asking the BRISC membership if there is one of you who would be willing to help. If you are interested, please contact

Roger Riddington, at Shetland Biological Records Centre, on (01595) 694688, email sbrc@zetnet.co.uk

Fife Endangered Plants Project – Dr. William Penrice

(Article based on the presentation given at BRISC's Annual Conference 26/2/2000)

We are all aware that good information is an essential tool in land management, site protection and in biodiversity action planning. However, there is a need for a level of quality which is seldom appreciated and rarely available. The Fife Endangered Plants Project was set up to investigate how this type of information may be collected and how useful it might be in practice. A total of 50 notable species were selected and all known sites surveyed in detail.

Accurate extents of the species occurrence were mapped, population estimated and an NVC survey undertaken by contracted surveyors. This generated a huge amount of information, and an early decision to have it validated by the BSBI recorder and Fife Nature as it was collected, rather than at the end, proved invaluable. The results highlighted the fact that collecting such detailed information was definitely within the capability of the Record Centre and that it was a valuable addition to the service we can provide.

An aspect of the project, which provided the bulk of difficulties and certainly the most controversy, was that of population estimates. There would appear to be a reluctance in the biological recording community to accept the use of population estimation despite it being a key requirement of the biodiversity process. Obviously, the main difficulties pertained to the habits of individual plants. Identifying the number of discrete individuals of vegetatively reproducing species, such as Cranberry, is impossible without resorting to genetic studies. Even the relatively straightforward Creeping Ladies Tresses would require uprooting, clearly not a real possibility. Clearly then, we may not be able to count actual individuals in a population, but we can measure indicators of the population size. Total area was used for Cranberry, hardly ideal, but far better than doing nothing. The total number of discrete clumps is the only possibility for other species. However, in terms of monitoring species where the population may change, but the distribution remain static, such indicators are invaluable.

While difficulties were encountered, none were really insurmountable and provide a good baseline for future monitoring. There have been many outcomes from the project including a public friendly full colour booklet on Fife's Wildflowers and a number of reports outlining the target species profiles, action plans, the analysis, how the information will be used in -planning and future recommendations for survey.

Dr William Penrice, Recorder for Fife
Nature, Fife House, Glenrothes, Fife
KY10 3DZ

Calling all Scottish plant users for

Flora Celtica

Since the first Stone Age settlers came to her shores, the people of Scotland have been relying on wild plants for their food, their medicine, their housing, their tools, and countless other daily necessities. The knowledge of how these plants can be used has been passed on from generation to generation, evolving with the changing times and maintaining its relevance to people's lives. Plants have also taken deep root in the language, place names and mythology of the country, from ancient clan badges to the names of football teams. There may not be many Scots left who believe in the powers of witches, but it is remarkable how many still flinch at the idea of cutting down the protective rowan tree from their garden.

In the summer of 1999, the people of the Isle of Tiree found themselves making cups of tea for botanists, who turned up on their doorsteps and starting asking questions about wild plants and how they were used. David and Nan McLouunan told their visitors of how, in their youth, they would collect up to twenty-five tons of seaweed every year, and reminisced about the 'honey-like' taste of sea lettuce. Hugh Maclean recalled how as a child, they would pick the deliciously acid sorrel leaves from among the potatoes and munch them while they harvested. Ian MacKinnon pointed out the plant, tansy, that his mother used to infuse in whisky and make him dring when he had worms. Ian MacKinnon demonstrated how yellow flag (iris) leaves could be used as an underlay for marram grass thatch, and Mabel Kennedy, in her house by the abandoned seaweed factory, remembered the fun that could be had by putting bladder-wrack in the fire and scaring people with the explosion of its air bladders.

Their visit was part of the fieldwork for the *Flora Celtica – Scotland 2000* project, base at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. The project is in the process of documenting and promoting the knowledge and use of native Scottish plants. Its aim is to raise public awareness of the diverse and fascinating roles that native plants have played – and continue to play – in their lives, and to promote the continued use of this wild resource on a sustainable basis.

It is an interactive project, in which people of all ages are encouraged to participate fully. Posters have gone out to schools, libraries and community centres across the country, encouraging people to take part. In May a theatre-based roadshow will be touring primary schools throughout the Highlands and Islands, raising awareness among the younger generation and encouraging them to learn from their parents and grandparents. Later, in July, a travelling exhibition will be launched in Edinburgh, which will tour the country for the next eighteen months.

We are keen to hear from you. If you know of – or come across – any Scottish plant uses (traditional or not so traditional), or folklore associated with Scottish plants, please do get in touch. Thank you.

Dr William Milliken, Associate Research
Fellow, Royal botanic Garden, Edinburgh,
EH3 5LR Tel. 0131 248 2969 Fax 0131
248 2901

FLORA CELTICA WEBSITE

<http://www.rbge.org.uk/research/celtica/fc.htm>

EDC website <http://www.edc.mcmail.com>

Seabirds and cetaceans – Dr Jim Reid

(Article based on the presentation given at BRISC annual conference and AGM 26/2/2000 at the Burrell Collection in Glasgow)

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee is the forum through which the statutory nature conservation agencies in the UK discharge their responsibilities at a GB, UK, and wider international level. It is assisted in this by a support unit that assists in providing advice to Government and which carries out and commissions research and survey to underpin this advice.

The Seabirds and Cetaceans section of the JNCC comprises the Seabirds at Sea and the Seabird Colony Teams. The Seabirds at Sea Team has been conducting surveys of seabirds (and cetaceans) in the waters around the UK and north-west European waters generally since 1979. Something like 1.5 million records of seabirds and 15,000 records of cetaceans are stored on the Seabirds at Sea and European Seabirds at Sea databases. At-sea surveys are carried out by professional surveyors, mostly on ships of opportunity such as fishery protection vessels, fishery research vessels, ferries, and even fishing

vessels. Occasionally special charters are organised that target specific waters for survey.

Surveying involves applying a standardised strip transect methodology. All birds (and cetaceans) are counted within a 300m wide band abeam of the survey platform. Once the data are computer-coded, bird dispersion may be mapped in a variety of ways. Usually, monthly or seasonal densities of each species of seabird are mapped within ¼ ICES rectangles (rectangular cells of sea measuring 15' latitude x 30' longitude). The data are also used in analyses that indicate how vulnerable seabird concentrations are to surface pollution at different times of the year and in different sea areas; the products of these analyses, so-called vulnerability atlases, inform the offshore activities of the hydrocarbon industry. The last 20 years or so have seen the gradual construction of seasonal pictures of dispersion patterns of the seabirds that occur in our seas.

In addition to identifying dispersion patterns, the biological and physical process that govern these patterns are also the focus of the Seabirds at Sea Team's work. Various process analyses have shown that dispersion of seabirds is a dynamic phenomenon, dependent upon equally dynamic processes that occur in the sea. Spatial and temporal fluctuations in oceanographic features, such as tides, currents and gyres, the formation and decay of oceanographic fronts, and abundance and availability of prey, have all been shown to have significant influences on patterns of seabird distribution and abundance.

Currently, four major projects are being pursued by the Seabirds at Sea Team. As well as a programme of generic survey around the British Isles and associated analyses, three other projects focus on specific geographical areas, namely the Faroe Islands, the Atlantic Frontier and the seas around the Falkland Islands.

Twenty-four species of seabird breeds in the UK, some in internationally important numbers. The protected status of these demands that their populations be monitored. The Seabird Colony Team is presently engaged on two major projects. The Seabird Monitoring Programme, established since 1989, aims to monitor seabird breeding numbers and performance mainly at four key sites around Britain: Fair Isle, Canna, the Isle of May and Skomer. In addition to providing an early warning system of poor seabird population success, the data also act as proxy indicators of the general health of the marine ecosystem. The

second major Seabird Colony Team project, Seabird 2000, aims to census all seabird colonies in Britain and Ireland over the course of the next few years. The third project of its kind (the others were Operation Seafarer in 1969-70 and the Seabird Colony Register in 1985-87), Seabird 2000 will serve as a snapshot of the total seabird resource in these islands. Population changes since the 1980s, general trends since 1969-70, and calibration of the project's results with those of the Seabird Monitoring Programme, will enable a bigger picture of our seabird heritage to be painted. Seabird 2000 also offers the best opportunity for the committed volunteer to get involved in important seabird research. A network of local organisers exists that ensures efficient organisation of the census. These local organisers welcome offers of assistance.

As mentioned, data on cetacean dispersion are also collected (opportunistically) by the Seabirds at Sea Team. Currently, an atlas of cetacean distribution in north-west European waters is being produced. This is being done in collaboration with two other partner organisations working in the same field. Such collaboration is a hallmark of all the work undertaken by the JNCC Seabirds and Cetaceans unit.

Further information may be obtained from the JNCC website: www.jncc.gov.uk

Dr. Jim Reid, Head, Seabirds and Cetaceans, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Dunnet House, 7 Thistle Place, Aberdeen AB10 1UZ

CD Review:

Biomar – Biotope Viewer

This CD is described as a 'map-linked database of information on marine sites, habitats and species recorded during field surveys of seashore and seabed in Ireland by the Biomar Group at Trinity College, Dublin and Ulster Museum Zoology Department in Belfast'. It has been published by the Environmental Sciences Unit, Trinity College, Dublin in 1997 – ISBN 0-9526-735-41

The sleeve notes contain user instructions. The opening screen presents four search criteria – species, sites, habitats, biotopes, which lead to screens where choices of location, species, etc, can be made to allow searches of the database. a variety of maps, photos, text descriptions of places and species can be extracted.

For example, selecting a species (*Arca tetragon*) leads to a list of site names and an option to plot a map. The map comes up with the list of sites beside it. Choosing one of those leads to a site description and a list of biotopes present; choosing a biotope gives a list of species present in that biotope at the site, and so on.

It all works well, with a couple of limitations: sometimes the text exceeds the window size; I could not pull up a list of biotopes in order to make a selection; following the instructions on species selection leads you astray. After each dip into the information pool, you have to start from the beginning. Numerous buttons lead to a screen saying 'web-page unavailable', including the 'about Biomar' button! As a demonstration disc it does the job; the results of the fieldwork are being made available cheaply and conveniently. There is evidently a lot of information in this database – pity there is no summary of how much, how it was collected, and what coverage.

However, there is still some work for us all to do in designing a format, which gives us all that we need from CD-based information. If you wanted to really use this disc, you would be stymied by the lack of a printed option or any means of transferring text into other programs.

Dave Mellor

The National Biodiversity Network in Scotland - Dr James Munford

The Vision

We are all developing a better understanding of the importance of maintaining the variety of life, or biodiversity, to ensure our sustainable future. Equally, we are made aware that on a global scale we are still losing an estimated 50 species a day. The importance of biodiversity was recognised by the Convention on Biological Diversity signed by 154 nations at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. Signatories are required to identify national components of biodiversity of importance for conservation and sustainable use, to identify those activities that pose a threat and to monitor both. There are other conventions and treaties to which the UK is a signatory that also deal with biodiversity and its conservation or enhancement. These include the Ramsar convention, CITES, the convention on migratory species, or CMS, and

agreements on climate change, which itself has a great bearing on biodiversity. These carry with them a need to monitor and report.

Changes in species distribution are being increasingly recognised as sensitive indicators of the effect of global warming. The long time series records held by volunteer recorders and the societies to which they belong are increasingly being seen as vital clues in estimating the impact of man's activities on the global climate.

We believe the National Biodiversity Network, the NBN, is an important initiative that will help to mobilise biodiversity data and maximise their use. The idea behind the network is quite simple. We already have notebooks, filing cabinets and computer databases full of biodiversity information. This information is being added to daily, although often in an *ad hoc* fashion, by about 60,000 recorders across the UK, most of whom are volunteers. The Internet offers a way in which those who want to know, or need to know, could access a good proportion of this information. Simple, but like all simple ideas the devil is often in the detail.

The Partnership

The National Biodiversity Network is above all a partnership that will allow and encourage people to participate in biological recording if they wish and increase their awareness of our natural heritage. This will be achieved by simplifying public access to the available biodiversity information and increasing the capacity for members of the public to contribute to decisions that affect the natural heritage. The improved validation and mobilisation of information will maximise its value for educational, research, conservation and recreational use.

The National Biodiversity Network Trust has been formed by some of the key players to co-ordinate the creation of the network. The Trust's membership consists of:

- Joint Nature Conservation Committee;
- English Nature;
- Scottish Natural Heritage;
- Countryside Council for Wales;
- Natural Environment Research Council;
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds;
- The Wildlife Trusts;
- The Natural History Museum;
- National Federation for Biological Recording (representing Association of Local

Government Ecologists, Biological Recording in Scotland, Biology Curators Group);

- Marine Biological Association;
- Environment Agency

The Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, MAFF (Farming and Rural Conservation Agency) and the Improvement and Development Agency for Local Authorities are observers on our key co-ordinating committee.

Resources

Together, we have been able to achieve a great deal on comparatively slender resources. The Wildlife Trusts have been able to secure funds from the Esmée Fairburn Charitable Trust to assist in their development of a model approach to the creation and development of Local Record Centres. The major holders and users of biodiversity information in the public sector are members of, or are linked to, the consortium. They have been able to channel some of their internal resources towards creating the network. We are also in discussion with the Heritage Lottery Fund and we are confident that they too will be able to channel some of their resources towards creating the NBN. They are particularly interested in funding those areas of the NBN that involve public participation, both as recorders and users of the information. The DETR have announced a cash injection into the NBN of £250,000 this year.

The Programme

Details of all the NBN's activities are available through our web site www.nbn.org.uk. On the site you can find out more about our proposed development programme. This consists of four themes containing 17 inter-linked projects, which can be further sub-divided into individual more focussed outputs for the purposes of securing funds. The themes are:

- *Co-ordinating Development*
- *Standards for contributing data*
- *Access to Biodiversity Information*
- *Using and applying wildlife information*

Progress

The JNCC will soon release the new Recorder 2000 software for recording species and habitat information, which will help in standardising electronic data holdings and thus ease exchange. I am confident that this new software will become the UK standard, as its precursor was before it with over 700 licence holders. It is also an area

where I am confident that the UK holds a global lead.

The important web gateway, index and dictionaries (species and habitat) have been started in pilot form, which can be used for demonstration of concept. The JNCC, NERC through the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology containing the Biological Recording Centre at Monkswood, are developing the gateway and index. The Natural History Museum and JNCC are developing the important dictionaries used in searching for data. Holders of data will be asked to participate in these projects as they progress.

We are hoping to develop educational applications for the mobilised data. This project is being led by the RSPB with co-operation from other members of the consortium who have the necessary expertise such as the Natural History Museum.

Local Records Centres will be important as data custodians within the NBN as will National Societies and recording schemes.

The underlying principal of the NBN is access, access to data or a view of the data. Clearly not all contributors to the NBN will want their data to be completely available. In fact most users would not want to be able to inspect the raw data, but they will want a view of it. In some cases this view will be quite detailed. It is likely, for example, that the public agencies that are participating in the NBN will have little reason not to be completely open. Others may take a more restrictive view. This may be fully justified; we can all see the case for being guarded about actual nesting sites of rare species of bird for example. We do have an expectation, however, that a meaningful view or interpretation of the data will be available. We are in the process of developing through consultation some generic rules that will apply to access.

The NBN and you

Easy access to quality biological information will, we hope, empower, enthuse and excite the public, generating commitment and informed involvement in the many environmental issues that affect our future. It is difficult to estimate the level of interest the British public has in wildlife related issues, but some indication can be gathered from the viewing figures for the BBC's 'Animal Zone' programme of 2.5 – 3.5 million, of whom 65-70,000 visit their web site weekly. If only a small proportion of these make use of the greater access to species and

habitat data which will become available through the NBN then we will have succeeded.

Clearly, the 60,000 recorders of species and habitat information will have their own reasons for using the NBN. Firstly, they will be able to track how their information fits into the local picture. They might be able to cross compare the local distributions of species or species with habitats. We make little use of predictive mapping in this country, but this is one area that the NBN will be able to advance. This local view could be extended to a regional or national view or to monitoring and interpret changes over time.

There are educational applications that we are presently developing. A teacher might wish to use their local environment as a teaching aid, or to tell their class something about wider issues using local examples. Again the NBN can help. We are also developing contact with the tertiary level of education through the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) who support the use of networks by higher education including JANET, the Joint Academic NETwork.

We are beginning to open up debate with commercial users of land. The great majority of commercial companies subscribe to the principle of sustainable development. They also wish to avoid conflict. The earlier they can build environmental protection into their development plans the cheaper and easier they are to implement. Early access to hard information is vital. The NBN will ease this process considerably. The species dictionary project alone is estimated to reduce by a factor of five the time needed to trace species records.

The recorder community is, unfortunately, an ageing one. This is issue that the NBN has recognised. One approach to improving the situation will be through training; both of existing recorders who wish to extend their skill base and training designed to encourage more people to become recorders. It is clear that this training will have to have a local focus if it is to succeed.

All of this paints a rosy picture for the development of the network, but any success will depend on the continuing support of our grass roots, the volunteers who continue to gather data on all aspects of biodiversity. I am confident that the NBN can continue to enjoy the support of BRISC. The recent publication of *A source Book for Biological Recording in Scotland* was in itself a significant milestone, access to the same information over the Internet would increase your

audience many times over. We know that many expatriate Scots return to Scotland to enjoy its natural heritage. Many of these will use the Internet to enhance their often once in a lifetime experience, together we can give them the information they seek. Our children's education can be enhanced through access to biodiversity information. But the main purpose is the gathering and dissemination of biodiversity information of a known quality to those who need it to make wise informed decisions whether they be personal or national.

Dr James Munford, Programme Director, NBN

Thursday 27th July The Wildlife Trusts are holding a seminar at the Royal Botanical Garden in Edinburgh entitled 'Generating data solutions through LRCs', with speakers from TWT, Fife Nature, SNH, RSPB and South Lanarkshire Council. Cost is £20 and Conference bookings with cheque should be sent by 14th July to

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(requesting an invoice will cost £2.50 extra)**

A Source Book for Biological Recording in Scotland

This publication has had excellent reviews and there are still some copies left, so if members have not already requested their free copy, then why not do so now. It is available from Anne-Marie Smout, Chesterhill, Shore road Anstruther, KY10 3DZ. Package and postage is £2,00 payable to BRISC – you could add it to your membership cheque!

Renewal of membership

There has been a good response following the reminder in the last newsletter, but there are still a

number of outstanding subscriptions. If you have not done so already, please fill in the pink form and send it with your cheque to Bill Brackenridge, Pallacerigg House, Cumbernauld, G67 3HU. We believe that BRISC is good value for money at £10 for individuals and £25 for corporate memberships.

Editorial

Apologies: notes on the Balfour-Browne Club have to be held over for the next issue. Photos accompanying the Flora Celtica article could not be incorporated.

Do you want to see more local news in the next issues? So do I. Send stuff in ASAP. DM

Deadline for next issue is 15th September
