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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Response from the Editor

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Source: Flood, S. (1978). Response from the Editor. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 1 No 9*, 2 - 4.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1575>

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR:-

Dear Sir,

With all the activity at present taking place in Museums and elsewhere regarding Biological Recording I find it rather odd that most people while content to use 10km grid squares or tetrads seem to be carrying on oblivious to the recent, often drastic, changes in many County boundaries. This is especially so in Scotland as we now have no administrative Counties at all!

While at the present time recorders may well realise that (for example) West Sussex used to be a Watsonian vice-county but is now a full administrative county in its own right, with part of the old "west Sussex" now in Surrey, I wonder how recorders of the future will cope?

To me this question of what County boundary is retained for recording purposes should be settled and the results published - ideally with a map of each boundary suitably marked or grid referenced so as to make things crystal clear. Could not the BCG set up such a scheme - perhaps a Museum from each county (or pre Local Government Reorganisation county) could work in cooperation with their neighbours and publish a mutually agreed boundary map. Local Authority Museums will presumably have access to the Council Planning Department or what ever body holds boundary records.

Perhaps many biological recorders will say that there is nowadays no need for the County or Vice-County unit, the 10km square having taken its place. That may be so in certain cases or for certain Orders. However I think most people will agree a set of basic Counties should be decided upon now before the dust of time fogs up our memories of the old County system.

Yours sincerely,

John Cooter
Glasgow

Stephen Flood (St. Albans Museum) replies

In answering this letter I wish to quote extensively from a chapter by Frank Perring of the Biological Records Centre in the Handbook for Local Records Centres, jointly produced by B. C. G. and B. R. C. which is due out very soon.

"Since 1870 Biological Recording in Britain has been much influenced by the Vice-county system invented by H. C. Watson. These vice-counties were based on the political counties of the time, but the larger counties were sub-divided (e.g. Norfolk into East and West) and some of the smaller ones amalgamated with neighbours (e.g. Rutland into Leicestershire) in an attempt to make the recording units less variable in size.

Until the extensive reorganisation of local government in 1974 and 1975 the vice-county boundaries still remained close enough in area to political counties, despite numerous small boundary changes in the intervening century, for naturalists to continue to use Watson's boundaries whilst collaborating with Conservationists and planners working on the boundaries of the day.

The 1974/75 changes have abolished some counties and produced several new ones out of 2 or more old ones. Yet in terms of Britain as a whole the total area affected is small whilst many of the 'lost' counties, which were almost identical with vice-counties, remain at the district level (e.g. Huntingdonshire, and most of the Welsh and Scottish counties).

The National Biological Societies like the Botanical Society of the British Isles and the Conchological Society are unlikely to give up the Watsonian system. This has been the basis of their recording for over 100 years, a modern map showing the boundaries clearly is readily available (Dandy, J. E., 1969, Watsonian Vice-counties of Great Britain. Ray Society), and they argue, with some truth, that experience suggests that the new boundaries will soon be altered by yet another local government reorganisation. The production of County Floras and Faunas has been a traditional activity of a number of national societies whilst the membership of many local natural history societies is on a county basis.

Many of the Local Biological Records Centres which have been in existence for several years cover an area which can be defined in terms of vice-counties. The literature and collections which they uniquely hold are related strongly to the boundaries they used to serve, officially or unofficially.

For most naturalists, it should be noted, the major boundary changes (excluding amalgamations, which are not relevant) have taken place in heavily built-up areas where their recording activities are small, whereas in rural areas in which most recording

takes place, the boundaries are little altered. Thus for most of the time, even using the latest maps, the naturalist has no difficulty in thinking he knows which vice-county he is in and will record accordingly.

If local records centres are to collect efficiently all the biological data for their area and yet serve the needs of, amongst others, local authorities, it may be easier for neighbouring records centres to arrange amongst themselves to duplicate data for areas where the old boundaries are no longer politically convenient, rather than try to alter traditional boundaries of local voluntary organisations.

Ultimately the establishment of a single records centre for each vice-county or county or even a group of counties will create a national data gathering network with enormous scientific potential. "

Although most local records centres will have information on where the vice-county and local government boundaries differ, Dr. Perring informs me that the Biological Records Centre at Monks Wood holds a set of transparencies of boundaries which can be borrowed and used for tracing etc.

The point which perhaps needs re-emphasising is that it will always be better to adopt an agreed and traditional base-line for survey, where necessary coming to some mutually acceptable arrangements about duplication of records.

Better a traditional system than one which changes with the vagaries of local government - at least until we are all governed within grid squares!

Dear Sir,

If Mr. Walley's intention was, by making a lunatic suggestion to provoke discussion, then I'm sure he has achieved his objective. I refer to his third proposal (B. C. G. Newsletter No. 8., page 30) "That the BCG encourages a policy of placing in public museums all type material at present in private collections, and that the status type should be officially questioned if they are not so placed".

This very arrogantly presupposes public museums look after their