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Local Record Centres and the BRC - Co-operation or Conflict? (WAEly)

Anyone working in a Local Records Centre (LRC) will have realised that the Biological Records Centre (BRC) has been shifting its ground for several years as it responds to the greater flexibility and capacity of computer technology. The previous role of mapping 10 km square records in large date classes has been replaced by an emphasis on precisely located and precisely dated site records. The latest manifestation of this increasing refinement is the Butterfly Card which requests details of site ownership, management and status. While I thoroughly approve of BRC using biological data as a resource for research into our wildlife I do wonder if the LRC's have any part to play in this vision of BRC's role.

When BRC was collecting records on 10 km squares over large date classes there was ample scope for an LRC to fill in the fine details for its own county or district and update the BRC file as necessary. We had the warm, cosy glow of knowing that we were playing our part in the great adventure of plotting the detailed distribution of our natural heritage. I accept that BRC's activities at that time were very wasteful of the computer's abilities and, indeed, hardly needed a computer at all. I also accept that in today's harsh economic climate BRC has to justify its existence, and the present emphasis on precise records makes better use of computer technology and provides a more valuable resource for NCC and other users. Unfortunately, in reducing (removing?) the role of LRC's in this process, BRC has made it more difficult for us to justify our existence. BRC may be a small fish in a big pond but it is a National Body, and our co-operation with it added to our prestige.

There are a number of practical drawbacks in this enhanced activity of BRC, and I feel that the LRC's could play a part in overcoming them. My own data bank deals only with the Rotherham area, less than three 10 km squares in extent, and as such is one of the smallest in the country. Yet I find it too large to cover in the kind of detail I should like. No site receives the concentrated year round study which is necessary to discover which species occur there and how their populations are behaving, and a comparatively small number of them are visited in any one year. While the coverage for birds and flowering plants is now quite good the other groups are in a pretty rudimentary state - very few sites have more than 500 species of invertebrates recorded. It is completely beyond my comprehension how a national recorder hopes to keep track of every site in Britain! Does Tony Irwin really want to know of every place where I have taken the dung-breeding soldier fly Chloromyia formosa and every date on which I find it, and does Howard Mendel desperately wish to hear of every record of the click beetle Athous haemorrhoidalis? I doubt it. The recent literature from the Butterfly Recording Scheme indicates that the rare and uncommon species are of particular interest, as one would expect, and the recorder is presumably not interested in discovering every site in Britain for the Meadow Brown and Large White. For these a 10 km square and wide date class are sufficient, so that attention can be concentrated on the species that actually need it. I would suggest that the LRCs could play a useful role in cutting down the work of the national recorders and, therefore, preventing a duplication of effort. I would suggest that a circular to the LRCs asking for a detailed report on the status of a particular species or genus, perhaps in the form of a questionnaire, would give the national recorder more (and better) information than the present system.

Part of the justification of BRC's present position is that it enables it to build up species lists for sites of conservation significance. This would ring more true if BRC were alone in this field and if it dealt with all groups of animals and plants. Not only do LRCs keep site lists but many other organisations do (or should do) - National Trust, County Conservation Trusts, NCC, local societies, etc. I would expect these other bodies to be more efficient at collecting data on their own sites than BRC is. BRC deals with only a part of our wildlife, totalling about 15,000 taxa (I would say only 15,000 taxa). Its site lists will not have records of Aphids, Ichneumons, Soil Mites, Earthworms or Fungus Gnats and so cannot claim to be comprehensive. An LRC's data bank can have these groups represented and should be able to supply information on them. Is this uneven coverage the reason why NCC has felt it necessary to set up its own Invertebrate Site Register?

Those of you who are interested in the Diptera will be familiar with Henry Disney's views on the necessity for objective assessments of sites. Many SSSI's have been designated on the recommendation of one or two individuals interested in one aspect of natural history. A site designated for its botanical interest may also be of considerable entomological interest, but it may be less valuable in this respect than a nearby site. LRCs are in the best position to collect data on all the woods, marshes, grasslands, etc. in their area and, therefore, make a more objective assessment possible. It should be an accepted fact that LRCs should be actively collecting this data rather than merely acting as a repository for other people's work.

I feel that LRC's can make a valuable contribution to national recording as well as fulfilling an essential local role, but we do need fairly detailed instructions from the centre. There is little point in us developing our data banks in ways which are incompatible with BRC's requirements, but at the moment we have little idea what these are. The national schemes are encouraging their contributors to deal directly with them and a great deal of local information is being lost to the LRC's. We are told that this data is available and we can always go and extract it, but this is not good enough. Would a national recorder be very grateful for a suggestion such as "I have plenty of information about the wildlife of our district/county and there may be some records of bees/craneflies/ ladybirds/dragonflies. You are welcome to come and see". We should be willing to supply information to the national recorders (though not, as I have indicated above, to the extent of rendering ourselves redundant) and in return we should expect them to keep us updated with records which they receive. If the computer cannot do that automatically then it really isn't trying very hard!

In summary, do LRCs have a role to play in the national recording networks, and if so how can we co-exist with BRC to our mutual benefit? If not, where do we go from here?

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