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CORNISH BIOLOGICAL RECORDS UNIT

Stella M. Turk

Murdock House, Cross Street, REDRUTH, Cornwall TH15 0BH

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

At the recent (September 1984) BCG seminar at Leicester, I was considerably surprised by the great variation of means available to, methods practiced by and material stored in the extant Regional Biological Record Centres. The common thread is the use of the county museums as bases but, as we do not even conform in that respect, I have readily accepted the opportunity to describe the work that we currently carry out in Cornwall as a sub-department of the University of Exeter. Personally, I would like to see a series of articles describing the accomplishments of and difficulties experienced by the various Regional Centres, with suggestions for improvements. I believe that we can learn from one another.

HISTORY AND AIMS

As early as 1962 when my husband (Dr.F.A.Turk) was President of the newly-formed Cornwall Naturalists' Trust (re-named Cornwall Trust for Nature Conservation in 1983) he conceived the idea of centralising species records for the county. Honorary recorders were appointed and the county museum agreed to house the records which were entered on specially designed cards. However, there was no means of transferring data and the various recorders neither wished to duplicate all their own records nor to hand over material on which they were still working. Moreover, although most plants had good coverage, a few did not attract recorders, as was true of the animal groups.

In 1972, four years before retirement as Reader in the Extramural Department of the University of Exeter, Dr Turk was asked by the Director of Extramural Studies, Professor T.F.Daveney, to devote a quarter of his teaching time to forming a Cornish Biological Records Index in collaboration with the newly-formed Institute of Cornish Studies, born from liaison between Cornwall County Council and the University and directed by Professor A.C.Thomas. As will be shown, this index has blossomed into the Cornish Biological Records Unit (CBRU) which, until 30th September of this year, was still under the direction of Dr Turk, a Research Fellow of the University since his retirement in 1976.

From the outset he was determined to record everything that had lived or still does live in Cornwall, and to tailor the work to the needs of the county. Thus the Index includes fossils and, still more important in a county so rich in Bronze and Iron Age remains, the subfossil fauna and flora. The Director's own researches are now almost exclusively in the field of archaeozoology.

We have continued to work in close collaboration with the County Museum, the staff of which regard us as an integral part of their resources. This is how the CBRU became the only Biological Records Centre to be under the aegis of a university. It is also the reason why a considerable part of its work is in servicing the needs of Cornish archaeologists and, to a lesser extent, research geologists and palaeontologists.

FUNDING AND STAFFING

The University of Exeter finances this part-time work with a research honorarium and an annual sum to cover expenses plus the services of a secretary for ten hours a week. Initially, from the expense account, a small sum was paid per hour to a few willing helpers for compiling One Species Record Cards from such basic sources as the Victoria County History of Cornwall. The main extractor of such records has, since 1978, become the part-time secretary. The previous year the project qualified for help under the Job Creation Scheme and two youngsters were allocated to cross-reference species records to a 10 km square system, enabling records to accumulate for national mapping schemes as well as acting as an inventory for each such square.

In 1979 a S.T.E.P. project allowed two employees to lay the basis of a Bibliography of Cornish Natural History. They worked in the Local History Studies Library under the direction of my husband and the Unit's secretary.

From its inception I helped my husband in a voluntary capacity with various aspects of the work as required, but every year saw an increase in involvement until, in the 1980s, I have been spending two or three days every week in Murdock House, Redruth where the records are kept, as well as dealing with the ever-growing amount of correspondence. After 30th September 1984 I myself take over the directorial duties.

VOLUNTARY HELP

At the recent seminar in Leicester, voluntary workers were described by one speaker in a despairing tone by one speaker as a 'mixed bunch', whilst another delegate, already coping single-handed with day-to-day work as a natural history curator as well as running regional BRC for the county, said that she did not have time to oversee such workers and that correcting mistakes was more time-consuming than undertaking the work in the first instance.

We have been fortunate in two ways, for not only have we attracted some first-rate help, but I have been at hand in Murdock House to devote as much attention as necessary to allocating and discussing work. It is this interchange that in turn the helpers say they find profitable to their own natural history interests.. They also enjoy talking to others with like interests, both fellow volunteers and those that call to consult the records, joining in fieldwork from time to time, and having the satisfaction of knowing that the work to which they contribute is not only useful now, but will have a lasting place in what future remains for us. Our own experience as Adult Education tutors has pre-adapted us for the situation as it developed at the CBRU. Many of the volunteers are past or present members of Adult Education classes, whilst others are students pausing between graduation and a post-graduate course or young graduates 'resting' between an M.S.C. job and further employment. We have found it encouraging for all helpers to give them a task which they can see through to a stage of completion, such as preparation of records for mapping, or compiling all records of some small group.

DATA BANK

1. BIBLIOGRAPHY

At an early stage it was evident that a comprehensive bibliography was an essential tool and in 1979 an M.S.C.

S.T.E.P. scheme in collaboration with Cornwall County Council became possible, on the understanding that the County Library was allowed to make a microfilm of the references.

Local journals and books were searched as well as standard texts and papers in widely scattered journals, many of them from our own library. We also visited the Library of the Marine Biological Association on several occasions.

In due course the secretary prepared an index covering appropriate cross-references to 10 km squares (or failing that, a region of Cornwall), subject (including collections), habitat and botanical or zoological categories. All records extracted onto the One Species Cards from the bibliography are indicated by author, initials and date. There are now some 8,500 items on the bibliography which includes MSS and covers a period from the 13th Century to the present, to which we add constantly.

2. SPECIES

To date we have over 24,000 species of plants and animals, representative of all groups, on One Species Cards (BRC's Gen. 2) covering some 300,000 records, cross-referenced on 10 km square sheets. With the present upsurge of interest in natural history, new county records (eg. for the nudibranch molluscs, parasitic copepods and most insect groups) are not uncommon, although of course the main work of our part-time secretary and our volunteers is to add to the records of species already recorded on cards.

3. SITES

We have over 400 surveys in the files, varying from short species lists to comprehensive descriptions of large sites, with species lists, vegetation maps and photographs. They are kept in files arranged in sequential order of the sixty Cornish 10 km squares, so maintaining the grid references as a basic index. Most of these sitessurveys and reports are the work of the Unit's 'staff', but we also have the National Trust series of reports and various others from the Nature Conservancy Council as well as theses and results of contracts with industry.

In order that one can trace readily and extract species records, the groups are listed on special 10 km chartsheets under the names of the surveys in which they occur. Especially helpful in this aspect of recording have been the gazeteers of the county compiled by the Cornwall Fire Service and the South West Electricity Board and kindly donated by those authorities.

4. HABITAT CARDS

In the early 1970s cards were devised for recording woodland, standing water and Cornish hedges. These have not been as successful as the other schemes, but recently the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers has intimated that "they will be valuable in helping us to monitor our work and assess the value of conservation projects". We regularly use the marine cards for rocky and sandy shores, prepared by the S.W. Biology Study Group in 1968. All of our intertidal surveys follow the headings on these cards.

5. GROUP FILES

These are used for lists of species from various Cornish localities that can not be placed in any one 10 km square.

6. REGISTER OF SPECIALISTS

Names and addresses are kept of specialists working on various plant and animal groups. We are frequently asked for such information at a local or national.

7. FILE OF CONSERVATION SITES

We keep lists of the Cornwall Trust for Nature Conservation Sites registered with the Planning Department SSSIs, and National Trust properties.

LINKS

Does our network work? The following are some of our links...

1. BIOLOGICAL RECORDS CENTRE, Monks Wood

From the beginning we adopted the cards and methods of the BRC in order to facilitate exchange of records. On two occasions representatives have been able to visit the National Data Bank at BRC, where we have received every courtesy and help in photocopying material relating to Cornwall. Although we are still not able to send in as many records as we would wish for, the mapping schemes, we are able to do so much more than previously, thanks to voluntary help.

2. NATIONAL MAPPING SCHEMES NOT CONDUCTED BY B.R.C. STAFF

We have direct links with the schemes of the Conchological Society (non-marine and marine) and Botanical Society as well as those for Orthoptera, Isopoda, Cladocera, Arareae, Echinodermata and marine Algae. We have in return received Cornish records from the national scheme organisers.

3. COUNTY MUSEUM

This museum, located in Truro, differs fairly considerably from most others in England. It is the property of the Royal Institution of Cornwall, founded in 1818 and supported by the membership, whose subscriptions now do little more than cover the cost of publishing the annual Journal. Grants from Cornwall County Council have become essential to the maintenance of the fabric and its important collections. As already stated, we work closely with the staff and this autumn we have been asked to assess the natural history collections held at the R.I.C. and to prepare a report to a subcommittee of the Council of the Institute detailed to consider future policies regarding all the collections.

4. CORNWALL COUNTY COUNCIL LOCAL HISTORY STUDIES LIBRARY, Redruth

We were provided with a venue at this library for the STEP scheme to compile a Cornish Natural History Bibliography in 1979, and the staff continue to help us in many ways, whilst we reciprocate by informing them of any Cornish material which might otherwise escape their notice. The Library holds the largest collection in the world of items on all aspects of Cornwall.

5. CORNWALL TRUST FOR NATURE CONSERVATION

The fortunes of the Trust have improved as membership has risen and a number of large-scale M.S.C. schemes have been

made possible. Amongst other projects, most of the several hundred Registered Conservation Sites have now had their boundaries mapped and vegetation surveys prepared.

With a Conservation Officer and her Assistant on the paid staff, all relevant planning applications are dealt with by the Trust. Essentially the work is conservation-orientated and, although various species records are passed on to the CBRU, the surveys are kept in Trust files for their own interpretation of the data. Species records are not compiled by the Trust. Any material in our care is made available to the CTNC, as it is to any enquirer 'without fear or favour' since we supply information to industry, developers and conservation groups alike. We maintain that a record centre should be impartial in all matters, ensuring however that the precise localities of rare or 'collectable' species are treated strictly confidentially.

We work particularly closely with the Trust on marine conservation and have helped in the pioneering of a Voluntary Marine Conservation Area in the Fal Estuary. We are now involved in the exploration of some form of protection for the Helford River.

6. NATURE CONSERVANCY COUNCIL

The Regional and Assistant Regional Officers as well as the Chief Scientists Team have been equally helpful in obtaining for us various important reports and surveys. The contract work on the sublittoral zone off Cornwall and the Scillies has provided us with data for the marine mollusc and algal atlas es as well as generally enriching our databank. We were also able to help with survey work and records when the Intertidal Survey Unit worked on Cornish shores under an NCC contract. Records and from SSSIs are passed on as they become available and three surveys of SSSIs have been undertaken specifically for the Regional Office. We have also been able to help with the compilation of the Invertebrate Site Register, information on rare and endangered species and data relating to marine conservation.

7. THE NATIONAL TRUST

From the time that the N.T. Biological Survey Team was formed in the late 1970s and the first 60 sites in Cornwall were surveyed in 1979, we have worked closely and cordially with the N.T., exchanging data whenever possible. Further Reports were produced by the Team in 1982 and we have the full number of these in the CBRU office. Our association with this organisation has been amongst the most fruitful and we hope it will continue to be so.

8. MARINE BIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF THE U.K.

We receive much help from the staff at the M.B.A. Laboratory at Plymouth and we have every facility afforded us when we visit them to consult their Library. All records, reports or specimens likely to interest the staff are forwarded in the normal course of events. Marine records and site surveys are extensively represented in the CBRU Data Bank, as befits the English county with the longest coastline and a wealth of 'southern' species.

9. LOCAL AND COUNTY-BASED SOCIETIES AND GROUPS

Our links with Camborne-Redruth Natural History Society, which celebrated its Jubilee in 1981, are necessarily

close since we are founder members, and our secretary and her husband have been Hon. Secretary and Chairman respectively since 1978. We are often involved in fieldwork with the CRNHS as well as the Lizard Field Club of which my husband is the present president. With membership of the Cornwall Bird Watching and Preservation Society, founded in 1931, we are assured of the publications being immediately available and we hold a complete run of their Reports. Currently, a volunteer is engaged on the continuation of extracting all bird records onto One Species Cards. We are frequently in touch with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, officers of which are very active in county affairs.

Very recently we have been approached by the Development Officer of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers which expects to use our habitat cards.

Close touch is maintained with all archaeological work by membership of the Cornwall Archaeological Society and by personal contact with Professor A.C. Thomas.

10. MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FISHERIES

Over the years we have developed useful links with various of the county services, including Rosewarne Experimental Horticultural Station, Newlyn Fisheries Office and the Veterinary Investigation Centre.

11. CORNISH BIOGRAPHICAL INDEX

We have a particularly strong link with the Cornish Biographical Index which is under the direction of Mr. F.L. Harris, Hon. Research Fellow of Exeter University, and which is also housed in Murdock House. Amongst the many sections of this extensive index is one devoted to Cornish 'naturalists' (in the widest sense) from the 12th Century to the present. This is of great use in many ways, including validation of some early biological records.

OUR CLIENTS

1. EDUCATIONAL GROUPS

We are often consulted about where local or visiting groups might study particular habitats with the greatest advantage to themselves and least harm to the environment. Individual teachers and students also turn to us for help on study projects, identification etc.. This includes groups from **far beyond** the county border, a fact that reflects the popularity of Cornwall as a venue for holiday work of all kinds.

2. RESEARCH WORK

Help is extended to students and staff of universities and colleges relating to various aspects of work in Cornwall, including references to literature, information concerning the distribution of species, types of habitat, former records etc.. Those engaged on the Bristol University Lizard Project have consulted our invertebrate records and we continue to be involved in this valuable work.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH DEPARTMENTS, MEDICAL SERVICES AND VETERINARIANS

Due to our specialist interest in insects and mites of medical and public health importance, we are frequently able to provide an identification service, as well as supplying

information on the incidence of a particular species in the county. In this way we have given professional help in research on acarine-caused human dermatoses, coauthoring with the County Dermatologist several papers on patients domiciled in Cornwall and, more unexpectedly, help in the investigation of a serious disease of dogs caused by a nematode worm of which the intermediate host is one or more species of slugs.

4. GENERAL PUBLIC

A growing number of individuals of all ages and stages of knowledge, 'phone or write with natural history queries, particularly on identification, and at the same time of course they add to our records, often very significantly in the case of migrant insects, drift organisms and sea-borne tropical seeds.

5. ARCHAEO-ZOOLOGY AND BOTANY

The Cornwall Archaeology Society is the centre for such studies in the county. Many reports have been prepared by Dr Turk, mainly on bone material, including several on the extensive finds from Nor-nour, Isles of Scilly. In this connection, distributional records played a major role, especially for fish and the smaller mammals. Human remains are not neglected (eg. the report on 9th Century graveyard population at Crantock) and this caused us to consider whether a register should be opened for records of pre-historic human remains. All relevant literature relating to these is already in the bibliographical index.

6. MINISTRY OF DEFENCE CONSERVATION SITES

We have helped with survey work at two of the MoD sites and the Unit is represented on the Conservation Committee of Nancekuke.

PUBLICATIONS

Our 6th Annual Report "Cornish Biological Records" has just been published by the Institute of Cornish Studies. This contains noteworthy records of various groups, excluding birds (which are published annually by the Cornwall Bird Watching and Preservation Society) and vascular plants (to be published by the Institute of Cornish Studies as a series of supplements to "A Review of the Cornish Flora 1980" by L.J.Margetts and R.W.David, published by the I.C.S. in 1981). C.B.R. No.3 was entirely on the alien fauna of Cornwall, and currently Dr Turk is working on an annotated list of sub-fossil Cornish plants and animals which will constitute No.7 in the series.

PROBLEMS

Despite all our help, the work is so labour-intensive that there is inevitably a backlog of records waiting to be incorporated fully into the system. At the same time there are so many records already 'processed' that the prospect of computerising all the data is a daunting one, expensive in time and money. If such were attempted we would wish to be sure that we were using a system that could be reconciled with that being used by other centres and organisations so that the maximum benefit would accrue. If this did happen, for a very long time, we would still need to rely on handling the records to relay information.

Another problem lies in 'netting' all possible information. Cornwall, by virtue of its geographical position and southern

fauna and flora, attracts many visiting groups and individuals, not all of whom are aware that we value copies of their findings on whatever scale and in whatever form. A national network on the basis envisaged would certainly help with publicity and it would be of great assistance if an annotated list of all Regional Record Centres could be updated annually and published in the BCG newsletter.

We would like to have the resources to instigate a photographic archive so that the many changes in the Cornish countryside can be recorded.

It would also be valuable to arrange investigations of the fauna and flora of mines but, so far, little has been attempted in this field although we do have a few records of the phreatic fauna of the county.

RESUMÉ

With the exceptions mentioned above, the major source of our day-to-day help has come from past and present students at the Department of Extramural Studies (which holds three year courses leading to a Certificate of Natural History Studies) where the biological sciences have, for several decades, been one of the major parts of the work in Cornwall. Cornwall is so far from the nearest university that the university presence here is more necessary and perhaps more varied than in most parts of the British Isles. Cornwall is still, at least as far as its cultural background is concerned, a Celtic Kingdom and the University's Institute of Cornish Studies is an expression of this and of the greatest academic importance. Cornwall County Council makes liberal grants (so far as one of the poorer areas of Britain is able to do) to further the University presence here, and this has been an important factor in determining the history of the CBRU and its unique character. Even today, the county is geographically isolated, with a unique geology, a coastline unmatched for length and for variety, and such characteristics as the long upland granite spine, centuries of mining activity and a uniquely southern latitude. All this makes its fauna and flora, as well as their study, a somewhat isolated area of academic interest which, in the broadest sense is 'un-English.' All this is reflected in the nature of the University presence and the somewhat different nature of our work to that which has been undertaken by other Regional BRCs. We suspect that our more distant future will see greater conformity with other Centres, but believe that diversity of region, nature, needs and history of all parts of the British Isles makes more than the most flexible standardisation positively detrimental..

Stella M. Turk
'Shangri La'
Reskadinnick
CAMBORNE
Cornwall TR14 0BH