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LOCAL RECORDS CENTRES AND ENVIRONMENTAL RECORDING - WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE ?

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Much has been written about the need for and functions of local biological and geological record centres (for instance see the bibliography in Stewart 1980). Recent surveys of centres and their activities include those of Greenwood & Harding (1981,1982) and Whiteley (1983). These surveys together with the list of biological records centres in Britain and Ireland compiled by the BRC show that there are at least 60 local records centres active in some way and there are certainly others founded in the last ten years which have ceased to function.

The Problem

Many of these record centres were formed in response to or at least took encouragement from the Leicester conference on centres for environmental recording (30-31 March 1983) and the subsequent visits of the then head of BRC, Franklyn Perring. Perring saw local record centres as a useful filter between the amateur naturalist and the statutory bodies, collecting and distilling distribution records to suit BRC's 10km mapping requirements. The BRC was intended to become the focus of a well-coordinated national network of recording centres acting as a font of inspiration and fulfilling a much needed pastoral role. This much at least was attempted through Flood & Perring's (1978) Handbook for Local Record Centres and continues in the production of recording cards and the occasional publication of useful lists of national mapping schemes.

In practice this grand scheme was doomed to failure and has failed for a number of reasons. Most importantly is the lack of financial backing. In the absence of central government funding it has been left for each area to fend for itself as best it can. Some centres have flourished, even growing into major regional data-banks, especially those adopted by local authorities or under joint authority and county trust auspices. Few however, could claim to be fulfilling all the roles which might be expected of them and far too many are languishing for want of recognition.

In recent years there has been a major upsurge in record centre activities thanks to Manpower Service Commission money, but surely this is 'building on sand'? What provision is being made for the time when MSC withdraw their support (as is rumoured every year)? There are also centres which are flourishing through the devoted energies of single individuals, what provision for the future is being made here? The loss of continuity under these circumstances is a major threat to a record centre's credibility and damaging to any activities which have become based on the centre. In the absence of a national strategy for environmental recording even the big metropolitan based databanks are not safe from local government changes which could affect their financing.

A second major reason for the failure of Perring's planned national network was that it did not take account of how the BRC's own position would change. The most recent description of the status and policies of the BRC published by Harding (1984) lays stress on the change from the original interest in distribution mapping to an increased emphasis on detailed site records, made possible, it is claimed, through the introduction of more extensive computer facilities. The BRC relies heavily on the NCC for funding and is therefore primarily committed to satisfying that body's requirements for site data, with presumably little time left for local records centres' requirements.

There are many dangers inherent in this change, as pointed out by Ely (1984) who rightly questions the ability of BRC to produce comprehensive reports on sites on the basis of the data currently collected. The NCC are of course filling many of the gaps for themselves, utilising large numbers of short-term contract staff both on surveys such as that for ancient woodlands and the invertebrate site register and on their statutory requirement for SSSI renotification.

All this extra survey work and interest in site records is to be applauded if one can rely on feedback to the regions and be sure that the BRC and NCC do not come to believe themselves to be self-sufficient. Unfortunately although the staff at BRC are always cordial to visitors this does not always amount to practical help. In Harding's paper (op.cit.) the list of BRC's users does not even mention local records centres nor is the use by voluntary nature conservation bodies regarded as significant. In the same list the use of BRC by professional and amateur research workers is said to be time consuming and relatively unproductive for BRC staff. The NCC is also usually cooperative, especially with local authorities and county trusts but this tends to be centred around their work on special sites rather than geared to everyday needs for information. Even Rayner believed the NCC to be understaffed and likewise with a staff of only 7 at BRC (who also have their own research to do) it is difficult to envisage how, even with computers, the service to the regions could radically improve.

Centralisation is all very well but many of the practical day to day problems of conservation take place on a local scale and need a quick local response. It is the local records centres, county trusts, planning departments and museums that shoulder this burden. They are also responsible for the bulk of environmental education, which relies on the availability of definitive information and without which real conservation has no hope. The draining of records from the regions to a central source without recourse or feedback to local record centres is a divisive action which can do nothing for the development of the comprehensive national conservation strategy, which we sorely need.

In the worst cases there is, I believe, a growing tendency for national bodies (NCC, BRC, National Societies) to consider local records centres to be of decreasing significance to their interests and likewise for local bodies (trusts, record centres etc.) to regard the national bodies of little practical help. Both 'sides' have come to rely on their own surveys, usually manned by temporary staff. This problem is compounded in the regions by duplication and even competition between groups with similar aims. It is not uncommon to find that local trusts, museum records centres and planning departments have all had field survey teams covering the same area which may also have been visited by NCC or even National Trust surveyors.

Each group may be acting as a quasi-record centre fulfilling its own needs. All this in addition to the on-going surveys of national and local societies, results of which may be held well outside the area. It is an interesting exercise to compare the site files produced by overlapping surveys held by each organisation to see how different they can be! Apart from the obvious waste of resources caused by this lack of communication there are further dangers in relying too heavily on short-term spot surveys. What checks are being made on the expertise of the surveyors and what is their previous knowledge of the area? In any case this work can only complement not replace long-term knowledge of a site and constant local vigilance.

A third reason for the failure of Perring's national network plan was that it did not prove practicable to divert records from county and national recorders to local records centres on any significant scale. The flow should have been the reverse of this from the national recorders to BRC for dissemination to the regions. In relation to the various national biological surveys it should surely be of concern that the BRC cannot take more responsibility for them and that the archives of virtually all these schemes are in the homes (or offices) of private individuals. This may be to the glory of the British amateur tradition and even help emphasise to BRC and NCC how much they still rely on local knowledge but how available is the information in this form? In the present situation potentially useful records, hitherto regarded as too commonplace or detailed for published national (or even regional surveys), have remained in the hands of scheme organisers and county recorders, often far away from the areas to which they relate.

What Can Be Done?

Clearly the problem lies at both the local and national level and is not so much one of lack of effort but a need for coordination and organisation. At the local level there has certainly been too much expected of record centres which in the absence of proper funding cannot function efficiently. It is because of this that disappointed potential users have been forced to go their own ways. This is how things will remain so long as there is no national policy for environmental recording and that can never come whilst the environmental lobby is so fragmented. In the

meanwhile we must accept things as they are and attempt to make the best of them and within these constraints look for ways in which our voice can be better heard.

The Local Approach

Much of the emphasis in this discussion so far has been on the accumulation of and access to species distribution records and site-related data. This is certainly where much of the national effort goes but these things should be seen within the broader context of environmentally related activities. The first steps which can be taken to coordinate these on a local or regional scale is to set about defining the Local Environmental Network. This is a task which any existing record centre could instigate however defunct it may at present be.

The instigator of the network could create a list of the various activities related to the environment and recording in a region and record who is fulfilling each function. This exercise could help point out areas of duplication or neglect and lead to a formalising of the relationships of groups to each other. Typical members of such a network would include county trusts, planning departments, museums, natural history societies, county recorders, conservation volunteers, water authorities, educational groups, NCC and representatives of other national groups with an interest in the area. Local Environmental Networks would vary in their structure across the country as they must be tailored to local 'historical' situations but all would need some organisational hub through a formal joint committee or perhaps carried on in a more informal way through an established records centre. Some areas may have already been through this exercise and have excellent networks established although perhaps not under this name but my experience in the south-west shows that many have not.

An important aim should be to produce a local environmental policy which sets out the aims and activities of the network in a way which ensures coverage of all the potential activities and continuity if key individuals leave the area. The value of a network policy would be that it would be a reminder of what needed doing and make clear which tasks are being carried out by the various network members. It also allows for the spread of some of these tasks, such as recording, across several bodies. This is good news for record centres because better communications may take much of the pressure off them. For instance in some areas a county trust with its wide membership and close involvement with the public may be the ideal group to sponsor simple surveys. The planning department may be the body that can best afford more specific activities whereas the museum with its 'hope' of long term continuity would be ideal as a repository for the information collected. It would also be likely that museum staff are the best placed to keep an eye on recording standards and the dissemination of information through the network.

One thing which becomes clear from this exercise is that local record centres can have a very positive role to play in the network, particularly as coordinators. This is a labour less likely to cripple them than the massive transcription tasks which many have engaged in, attempting to fulfill the role that Perring envisaged for them. Indeed a record centre need not necessarily even have distribution and site records 'per se'. It could in some areas start by acting purely as coordinator of the network, maintaining the local talent files, keeping details of who has what records and acting as representative. Some of the functions which record centres may play within the network are listed in Appendix 1.

To be successful the establishment of the network must make few extra demands on the available labour as it is always the already busy people who have to take up these tasks. It must also be cheap. From what has been said it can be seen that to a large extent all that is needed is good local communication. Many will claim that this already exists in their areas but this is not universally true and in any case the existence of a formalised local environmental network would do much to unify the environmental lobby in a way that is sorely needed. I believe that this local approach could also be successfully applied on a national scale.

The National Approach

The second phase of the solution could be to create a national federation or umbrella organisation for local and regional environmental networks. This organisation could take over the role of guidance started by BRC and could become an effective mouthpiece for environmental recording. If it were a federation of local environmental networks rather than just record centres it could claim to be representative of the environmental community as a whole and thus become a credible lobby on environmental issues or to sources of government funding. By publicity and communication it could become an important force in the integration of recording into the whole framework of planning and conservation. Some of the possible aims and functions of a national federation are listed in Appendix 2.

I do not feel that it would be very efficient to start this federation 'de novo' but in the spirit of integration it would be better to look for an existing organisation that could sponsor such a group. Some suggestions of likely organisations are the RSNC, the BCG/GCG or the Museums Association. The first move, however, would be to set up a working party to outline the aims and activities of the federation and discuss the situation with likely sponsors. I believe the time is right for such a move. We are in desperate need of a national conservation strategy and environmental recording (and the role of records centres) should be included in that strategy. Perhaps these are ideas which can be floated at the conference on record centres at Leicester in September.

Appendix 1

What Contribution can a local records centre make to the local environmental network?

1. Maintain a list of organisations and individuals involved in the local environmental network and a description of their functions.
2. Act as a focus or forum for otherwise disparate groups and individuals. Be available as a place for advice, provide space to work, company, encouragement and neutral territory between sources and users of information. Be the coordinator of the network.
3. Help avoid duplication of effort by guiding seekers to sources of information.
4. Maintain a talent file of experts both local and national who are willing to undertake identifications, carry out surveys or advise on environmental matters.
5. Offer guidance and information on standards of recording in the form of recording cards, recording etiquettes and practical workshops. This is particularly important if surveys are being conducted by non-specialist groups such as wildlife trusts.
6. Act as an archive for the 'hardcopy' associated with previous local surveys, ephemera of local societies and other natural history manuscript resources.
7. Maintain a register of all surveys (including national) both finished and current that have reference to the local area.
8. Maintain a bibliography of all works relevant to the environment and wildlife of the local area, collecting if possible as many of these together for reference. Likewise have access to complete map coverage for the area.
9. Maintain a register of volunteers willing to take part in surveys or related activities.
10. Offer employment and experience either to volunteers or through grants and temporary employment schemes. This has positive value in the promotion of the careers of dedicated naturalists and gives worthwhile experience to enrich the interest of keen amateurs.
11. Answer questions. Be able to tell a member of the public what they have seen and what its local significance is or at least guide them to the sources of such information. Provide information for teachers on sites where they can take classes for maximum interest and minimum damage. Provide information for public displays.

12. Community outreach programmes. Educate the public in environmental matters by means of general publications, lectures and walks. Organise simple surveys in which they can take part and from which they receive maximum feedback.
13. Store or have details of the whereabouts of voucher material and original source material.
14. Act as a clearing house for local records eg. species distributions, site descriptions, projects, especially aiding local societies with the transcription and interpretation of their records. Passing records onto national surveys.
15. Publish newsletters and information sheets.
16. Publish local distribution atlases and related works.
17. Organise or be involved in major local surveys that require cooperation of many groups and individuals eg. a county flora.
18. Cooperate with the BRC, ITE and NCC in their work of recording, research and conservation. Obtain information from these bodies for local feedback. National publications rarely have detailed local information and individuals may not have ready access to national data sources - act as an intermediary for them.
19. Cooperate with local planning bodies in questions of planning or creating local structure plans.
20. Participate in public enquiries of local environmental impact. The need for expert knowledge and high standards should be used to encourage cooperation and a corporate consciousness between societies and groups.
21. Be up-to-date and caring. National computer databases may be fine but **nothing** replaces detailed, current local knowledge. National recorders and officers of statutory bodies cannot be in all places at all times. It is ultimately only a well informed and environmentally conscious community that can conserve and care for the local area.

Appendix 2

Aims and Functions of a National Federation

Some of the possible aims of a national federation could include;

1. To enhance the corporate identity of local record centres and environmental networks which are at present acknowledged in only an informal manner. The existence of such a group could be important in areas as yet little organised.
2. To create a working policy for national recording which takes proper account not only of the national needs of official bodies such as the NCC and particular needs of national societies but also of local needs, and affirming the importance of the local amateur basis.
3. To integrate environmental recording into the mainstream of a National Conservation Strategy and thus provide an argument for more appropriate funding.
4. Establish formal contact with major professional bodies eg. Museums Association, Area Museums Council, Nature Conservancy and Department of the Environment.
5. To create and promote a code of standards or guidelines which local centres or networks could use to support applications for funding. The existence of a policy and proven relationships with major environmental groups would do much to gain credibility for the records centre movement.
6. To act as a pressure group representing the broad base of environmental recording to government (local and national).
7. To support local records centres and environmental networks by means of publications on methods and by providing them with useful data common to all regions.

Some ways in which the Federation could function are:

1. Set up conferences, seminars or committees to pursue a fuller understanding of the 'record centre' concept and its role in society.
2. Hold regional and national seminars aimed at practical problems and giving progress reports.
3. Publish a newsletter with items pertinent to record centres, updates on national surveys, requests for help etc. (This could be published independently or as a space in somebody else's publication).
4. Foster the interchange of information on techniques eg. cards, computers recording formats and data standards.

5. Publish information sheets on useful topics eg. how to set up talent files, how to compile bibliographies and how to carry out surveys.
6. Circulate information relevant to the files of all centres eg. lists of national recorders, surveys, experts etc.
7. Elect representatives to speak for environmental recording and networks as a body.

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