



NATIONAL FEDERATION FOR BIOLOGICAL RECORDING

(01462-742684)

As from: 56 Back Street,
Ashwell,
Baldock,
Hertfordshire,
SG7 5PE

5th March 2009

Dear Sirs,

Petition PE 1229 to the Scottish Parliament: reply to the request for a response from the National Federation for Biological Recording.

The National Federation for Biological Recording would like to offer its thanks to the Scottish Parliament for this opportunity to respond to the issues raised by this Petition.

The NFBR is a non-profit, independent practitioners' organisation, founded in 1986 to

- bring together suppliers, managers, and users of information about species, habitats and wildlife sites;
- promote a forum for discussion and sharing of knowledge and experience;
- promote the importance of biological information in nature conservation, planning, research and public participation;
- represent the biological recording community.

It has some 155 current members, many of whom are professional staff involved in the collection or management of data concerning wildlife and natural habitats in various organisations, both governmental and non-governmental. Its activities over the intervening 23 years have been to encourage the establishment of local records centres in much of the UK, the development of professional standards in biodiversity information collection and handling, and the establishment of the National Biodiversity Network.

In response to the specific questions that you have posed, and considering the presentations made at your meeting of the 27th January, we can make the following responses:

1. We do consider that the petition from BRISC is worthy of support, in particular noting that they have emphasised the essential element of integration at both local and national (Scottish) levels, without being explicitly prescriptive about how this should be done.

2. We would therefore strongly support the creation of an **appropriate** biological data-sharing partnership in Scotland. The potential value of this has been very effectively outlined especially by the presentations of Mr Macadam and Mr Macdonald, and we would support their views. It is important, in particular, to identify the key benefits that are not currently available to much of Scotland:
- A consistent and professionally supported system at the local/regional level of acquiring, collating and managing biodiversity data in such a way as to enable them to be used effectively for nature conservation, planning, education and other public-benefit uses. With the continuing advances in both technology and knowledge about biodiversity generally, development of standards and mechanisms for collating and handling data have advanced substantially, especially in the last ten years. However, this requires a considerable amount of both technical and administrative support, as well as some financial resources, to enable the benefits to be felt effectively. A network of professionally supported organisations, at the right level of both geographical separation and capability, would enormously improve the availability of up-to-date, reliable and locally-relevant data.
 - The co-ordination and support to especially local volunteer organisations that such a system would bring. At present, there are a very few Scotland-wide organisations that carry out important biodiversity recording work, such as the Scottish Ornithologists' Club and the Scottish recorders of UK-wide bodies, such as the Botanical Society of the British Isles etc., but there are many other organisations that are very small and operate in limited areas with very limited resources. Scotland also does not currently have the benefit of as many active recorders as other parts of the UK, which is partly a result of differences in demography and geography, but also owes much to this lack of an infrastructure of support at the local/regional level.
3. The presentation especially from Mr Macdonald highlights the issue of availability of biodiversity data, and their lack in many areas in Scotland. We would strongly support what he has said. In particular, we note and support his view that there are substantial potential sources of already-existing data in many areas that are not currently being tapped, purely owing to the lack of anyone actively seeking to collate and manage the data. In addition, there are substantial lacks of data on many areas of biodiversity because no one has yet actively worked to carry out the necessary surveys. This is particularly the case for systematic, standardised information on natural and semi-natural habitats throughout much of Scotland. Where such information has been collected by SNH or other institutions, it is often not at the kind of scale or in the level of detail that is required when planning or other land-management decisions are needed to be taken. In addition, species data collected by UK-wide recording schemes (often available through the National Biodiversity Network Gateway) are often not collected at the kind of level of precision, or in the right context, to be of direct use in the local situation, because the organisations concerned have not seen this as their priority. One value of a local records centre is that it is able to match species data collected by others with habitat information collected locally, and to enable interpretations to be made accordingly. At the same time, they are also in a strong position locally to identify gaps in knowledge, and potentially to find support for filling them, either using voluntary networks, or professionally.

There are also one or two other specific points that we would like to raise.

Firstly, we would recognise that, unlike other areas of the UK, the nature of the Scottish landscape has meant that only parts of the country are similar to those areas in England, in

particular, that have so far developed effective local records centres (such as Hampshire, Sussex, Leicestershire etc.). This means that any approach to the issue in Scotland would have to be a specifically Scottish approach, relevant not only to the geography of the country, but also to both the availability of resources and the logistics of communication, as well as to the local need for data. The latter will also vary considerably across the country. While, in some areas, data will be needed especially for planning purposes, in others data might be more useful for nature conservation initiatives or estate management, or even promoting 'green' tourism. Use of modern technology to create effective 'data hub' systems involving a number of participating organisations is one mechanism for overcoming some of the issues, as is being developed across Yorkshire and Humberside, and is also being used in Wales.

Secondly, we would suggest that the Scottish authorities take the advantage of recent experiences in Wales, where strong support from the Welsh Assembly Government has resulted in a Wales-wide system, tailored to its needs, coming into existence in not too dissimilar an environment as in much of Scotland. This initiative, now consolidated under the aegis of the Welsh Environmental Information Forum, acts as a support mechanism for the Countryside Council for Wales, both in handling CCW data, and also in acquiring locally derived data, as well as managing these datasets and making them available locally and nationally to users through an integrated system. This system is still in the process of development, and in particular its integration with the wider picture in the UK through the NBN has yet to be fully established, but their experience might be specially useful as a starting point for discussions.

As for the role of the NFBR in tackling these issues, we are a small, voluntary organisation whose work is aimed at helping others to carry out their own development, and so we have few resources to assist directly in work on the ground. However, among our membership we do have a very wide body of expertise, and would be happy to participate in any discussions about possible solutions, bearing in mind that we are a UK-wide body, and already have representation of BRISC on our Council. In addition, the NFBR has contributed significantly to data standards development implemented in data capture software that might be used in various solutions; and in the guidance developed and published by the National Biodiversity Network Trust.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Trevor J. James". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Trevor J. James
Chairman
On behalf of the Council of the National Federation

Public Petitions Committee,
Scottish Parliament,
Edinburgh,
EH99 1SP