



NERC call for evidence regarding the merits of establishing its research centres as independent bodies outside the public sector

August 30th 2013

Response from the National Forum for Biological Recording (NFBR)

Although we in the wider recording community all rely on BGS for geology information and analysis and the National Oceanography Centre for a marine context, our main concern here is the survival of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) and its environmental services, especially the Biological Records Centre (BRC).

Our comments are somewhat limited by the lack of information on the current funding arrangements and the details of the various options that could be possible for the future.

We are raising our concerns that any change could pose a risk to the present arrangements and services which we as an organisation, on behalf of many others, value highly.

Currently CEH is valued for the quality of its scientific research, its independence, integrity, authority and competence.

Its BRC service is especially valued because of:

- its continuing development of its historic role in organizing national recording schemes, collating and interpreting large scale national datasets and publishing the results.
- its role in undertaking original biological research relevant to understanding the UK biodiversity in a changing environment
- its role in manipulating and analysing other large national datasets and its maintenance of the NBN Gateway
- its role as a centre of biological recording expertise that is available to all recording groups and individual recorders, and the international links it supports especially as a European leader in the environment.
- its role in publishing national summaries across the UK taxa.
- its role in developing partnerships to develop and extend its services and share the cost of projects and publications.
- its role as figure head for innovation in biological recording and outreach to new communities and raise public awareness of recording and its role in understanding the environment.

The above makes the CEH and its BRC services unique in the UK and key to the exploration, understanding and consequent protection and enhancement of the UK's biodiversity. Its well-known national and international status for research and for helping the serious and aspiring naturalist gives it a unique place in biological recording. If it wasn't there it would have to be invented.

NFBR expects that any change in ownership and governance of the CEH/BRC should ensure they will still:

- operate nationally and for the 'public good'.
- operate in a way that encourages the current numbers of volunteer recorders to feel valued, and working towards the common good and not supporting a commercial enterprise for commercial gain.
- remain scientifically independent and be free to publish material that may be politically sensitive or not to the advantage of its funders.
- support the national recording schemes, and be able to expand them as may be required by any increase in multi-taxa recording.
- retain their current ability to undertake research within its own priorities as separate from externally funded research projects.
- retain their current quality of service.
- plan to retain their skilled personnel through suitable contracts that encourage the building of on-depth knowledge and skills, and engage in the long-term relationships with the recording community that are so productive and valued, (as opposed to short-term contracts between many personnel so favoured by some academic institutions).
- have sustained finances and maintain their current capacity for work.
- have flexibility and opportunity to grow capacity as circumstances may change.
- give clarity as to who directs research, to what purpose.
- have the means to meet the wider biological recording community's needs.
- serve the 2020 Biodiversity Strategy

The NFBR believes the next few years will be a crucial time for the UK's natural environment. Although there are key strategies in place, such as the **Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services**, there is widespread concern about how they can be put into practice and deliver what is needed in terms of biodiversity assessment, protection, enhancement and monitoring.

CEH and its BRC are key components of a wider partnership of specialist organisations that are working together to collect and make sense of the large quantities of UK biological information that a far larger network of volunteer recorders and practitioners continue to put together.

This is not the time to casually restructure such a key component if it risks its work in delivering sustainable biodiversity and its ecosystem services. However it could be the time to strengthen and invest in it. NFBR believes that the decision to change the ownership of CEH/BRC should be decided by that outcome - will the change increase or decrease their effectiveness in terms of capacity and quality and their role within the work of ecological monitoring and environmental management that strategies such as Biodiversity 2020 require.

Part of that calculation should include how any change will temporarily divert organisational and individual energies when important work on UK biodiversity priorities need to continue.

National biodiversity priorities and many individuals who contribute to the wider 'national biodiversity network' depend on CEH/BRC and cannot wait several years for any lost momentum to be regained.

NFBR has concerns over the process of deciding on the future of CEH/ BRC and we would appreciate more details of any independent review of the decision and we would like to see a clear breakdown of any comparison of costs for the options for the current and planned arrangements - ideally by management, staff, facilities and research costs etc.

Finally NFBR wishes to thank NERC for its support of the CEH and its BRC and we hope it will continue to do so under any future ownership or management arrangements, and develop one of its most useful organs for research, environmental management and public engagement.

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