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Inclusion of biological records and related information in local decision making

Simon Pickles and Matt Millington

North & East Yorkshire Ecological Data Centre

Email: info@neyedc.co.uk

For over a decade, the North and East Yorkshire Ecological Data Centre (NEYEDC) has been collecting, collating, analysing and disseminating environmental data. The Centre achieved the Defra-recognised Association of Local Environmental Record Centres (ALERC) accreditation in 2013.

One of our main functions is to ensure that the best possible biodiversity data are considered when local decisions that may adversely affect species or habitats are made. Key sources of this evidence base are amateur naturalists, providing both records and expertise. The intellectual copyright of all biological records is retained by the original observer.

NEYEDC would like to know what amateur naturalists feel should be considered when local planning issues arise in their areas. Sites can often have ecological, social or cultural value locally that is not recognised from available records of species and habitats or land use. Therefore these green spaces can be often overlooked in the planning system, leading to the loss of 'important' sites at a town, village or parish level. Many sites that are valued locally have no status in the planning system because they do not match the relevant ecological criteria necessary to become local wildlife sites, are too small to qualify or have not been proposed for formal surveys. NEYEDC would like to start exploring this issue with interested parties.

Another area of interest that has not been fully explored is identifying and reporting on sites that contain an assemblage of species which do not hold legal protection in their own right but collectively show the value of a site that is not apparent just from the plant community present. This is most relevant to invertebrate groups but can also be an issue for birds, for example those reliant upon areas of scrub.

In order to recognise sites of this type, NEYEDC does not need to hold raw supporting data but must be able to 'signpost' a reliable and available source, which can be a local source.

For the evidence base to be effective in local decision making, it is essential that the information is kept up to date. For example, Allerthorpe Common SSSI is the only known site in East Yorkshire for Adder *Vipera berus*. Although it is well-known as an obvious site by groups and individuals, only one of the 34 Adder records currently held in the NEYEDC database dates after 2003. A cross reference with NBN Gateway (which now contains 100 million records) provides no further records of Adder on this site in the last 11 years. It is worth noting that planning decisions often only consider records from the preceding ten years.

Some naturalist groups assume that data sent to national schemes and societies, associated local groups or online recording schemes such as iRecord, will automatically be considered in important local decision-making processes. This is not necessarily so; even the very large national organisations lack the resources to support every local decision, or are unable to provide the original data at the level of detail required for local decision-making.

For example, a search on the NBN Gateway provides 587 records for the Marbled White butterfly *Melanargia galathea* in the North and East Yorkshire area. However, only 9 of these are given at a high enough resolution to be meaningful in a planning application, with most being kept at a 10km grid square resolution. Only 17 of these records are from the last ten years. This pattern is repeated for many taxonomic groups.

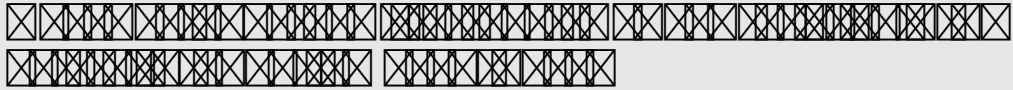
This lack of data can lead to disappointment when there are significant gaps in the information used to support decisions or formulate policies. Previously, NEYEDC had entered into an agreement with the NBN and National Schemes and Societies to try to create the most efficient data flows possible; this was designed to minimise replication of effort on the part of data donors, including amateur naturalists and county recorders. Under this agreement, NBN Gateway was working with National Recording Schemes to allow any data entered into the Gateway to be recoverable by local record centres at the resolution it was given, but this has still not taken place and a lot of records from National Societies are only available at 10km grid square resolution.

Hypothetical scenario

An application is submitted to a local planning authority for a small-scale development on a semi-improved grassland. This field was surveyed in the previous year by a local naturalist group, which resulted in an extensive butterfly list including the UKBAP species Dingy Skipper *Erynnis tages*. This survey had been sent directly to Butterfly Conservation for its records. However, many National Societies do not make their data readily available to local record centres, so the information cannot be used in local data searches.

This grassland is also 'known' by local individuals to have Thistle Broomrape *Orobanche reticulata*, a nationally rare plant. However, this record has never been submitted to NEYEDC and so is not in the evidence base. Therefore, the initial data searches requested from NEYEDC as part of the planning application provide no biological records from the grassland and so it passes pre-application checks and requires no ecological surveys.

We would like to invite all the natural history groups within North and East Yorkshire to consider the data, information and expertise at their disposal, and which elements they would like to ensure were included when decisions are made about their areas of geographic interest. NEYEDC staff would be delighted to discuss with individuals or groups how this can be achieved.



R.A.Baker The Bungalow, St Johns Park, Menston, Ilkley, LS29 6ES.

S.Gill 123 The Longshoot, Nuneaton, Warwicks, CV11 6JQ.

Introduction

Most microscopical societies, although beginning independently, soon became parts of larger organizations known as Scientific or Natural History societies, although some were offshoots of already established societies. They proliferated in Yorkshire in the second half of the 19th century and most large towns had one. The forerunners of today's naturalists' societies at Doncaster and Wakefield have been chosen for closer study. In many ways they illustrate similar features but each has its own origin, characteristics and subsequent fate. The society at Wakefield was initially for physicians and surgeons whereas clerics played an important role at Doncaster. As technology improved, manufacturing increased and prices dropped, the microscope became an essential tool, accessible to increasing numbers of naturalists. The vast majority of these were amateurs and included clerics, pharmaceutical chemists, engineers, shopkeepers, accountants, schoolteachers and doctors. Most were passive members but a few made a genuine contribution to knowledge or to their society and, in rare cases, to both.

Background

The formation of provincial microscopical societies was a feature of the second half of the 19th century in Britain (see Appendix 1) and several were established in Yorkshire during this period, such as those at Wakefield (1854), Bradford (1860), Doncaster (1880), Huddersfield (1893) and Sheffield (1877). In the first half of the century few people owned a microscope, which was an expensive show case item rarely taken out of its box and "too valuable and delicate to bring into use except on very special occasions" (Allen, 1978). People did not understand how best to use the instrument and there were no training courses, but soon there were improvements in design. Following Robert Brown's discovery of the cell nucleus in 1831, scientists and medical professionals began to take a greater interest and were using the microscope to identify food adulteration and to examine microbial organisms, diatoms, plankton and diseases. When microscopes became more readily available, they were popular with naturalists seeking to study minute animals and plants, which could only be examined through their lenses.

The proliferation of field clubs, natural history and microscopical societies in towns and villages provided an opportunity for the mixing of the social classes and, although some were working class organizations such as at Huddersfield, a few were established as exclusive clubs. Following