

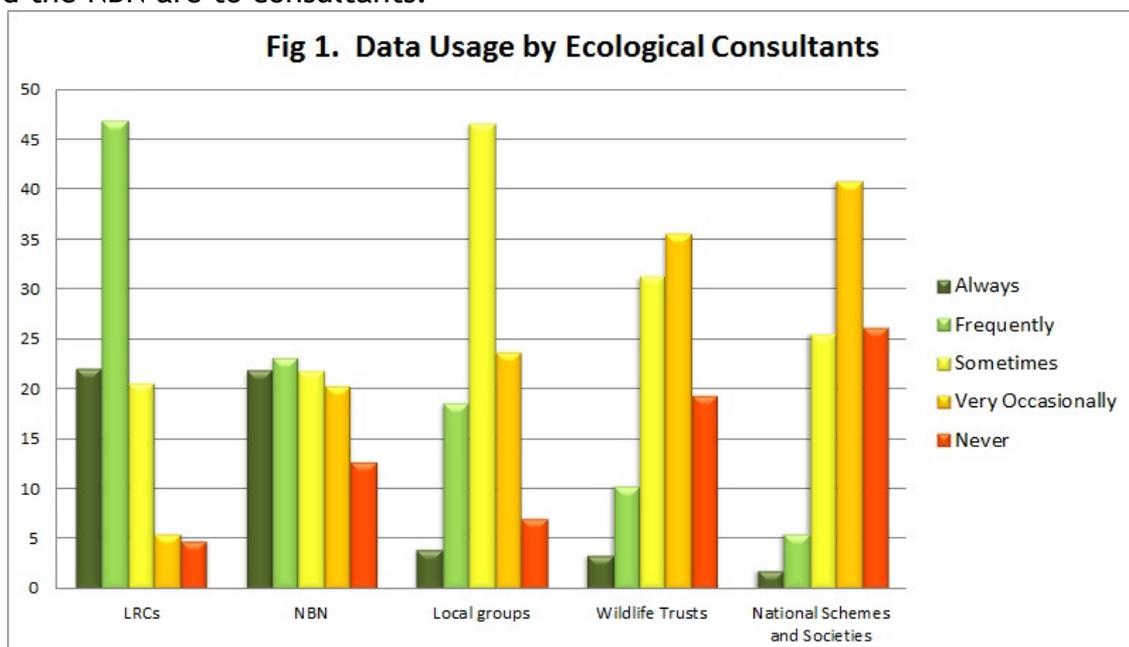
Surveying Consultants' Attitudes to LRCs and Biodiversity Data

The collection and use of biodiversity data is becoming increasingly important as more emphasis is placed on wildlife records as a tool for decision makers and policy makers. As the mass of biodiversity data proliferates, it is essential to ensure that records are kept to a high standard, data providers adhere to a good standard of service provision and that as much data as possible it made available to decision makers.

In order to investigate this topic in more depth, IEEM and the Association of Local Environmental Record Centres (ALERC) have recently collaborated on a survey of ecological consultants. The survey had a special focus on LRCs and data sharing. It received a good number of respondents (473) and produced interesting results, some of which were expected and some of which were more surprising. The overall result of survey was to show that satisfaction with the data received from LRCs varies greatly. Attitudes to sharing data also vary, although generally people seem willing to share data if a limited number of obstacles can be overcome.

This survey will prove very valuable in focussing future effort in the right places to make sure that useful biodiversity data is readily available to those who need it. As a result of the survey, there is now strong documentary evidence that the consistency of LRC data provision needs to be improved, and that there needs to be an easier system to allow consultants to share their records.

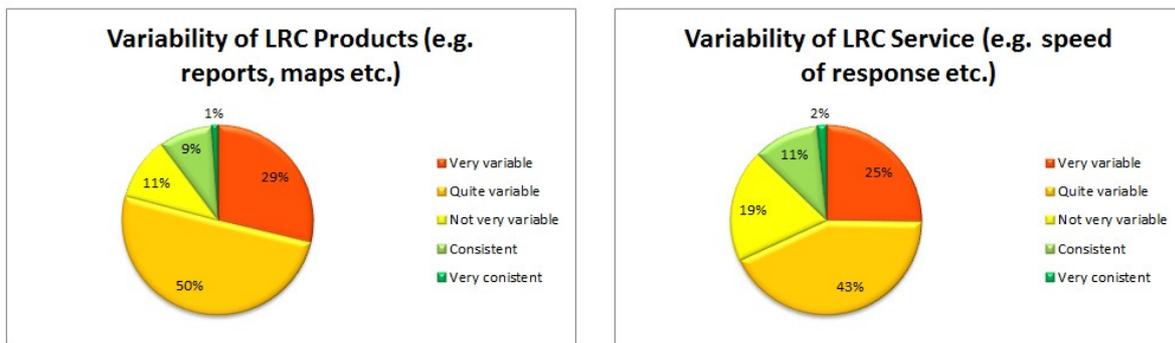
It is important to ascertain how wildly ecological consultants use various sources of biodiversity data. The results clearly show that the two main sources of data are local records centres and the NBN Gateway. 69% of respondents said that they use data from LRCs either for every job, or for most jobs and 45.1% of respondents said the same about data from the NBN Gateway (see fig.1). There are also several other sources of data used by professional ecologists, although these are usually only used occasionally. This result demonstrates how important data from LRCs and the NBN are to consultants.



Further questions were aimed at finding out why some people only use LRC data infrequently and what could be done to improve the way in which LRC data is provided. Cost of data provision was cited as a reason for not using LRC data by 57.9% of the 133 people who classed themselves as “seldom users”. This was also reflected in the comments left on the survey, with many respondents choosing to single out the LRCs who they thought were well priced, and those they thought were over-priced. It is perhaps unsurprising that cost is cited as an issue surrounding the paid-for service from LRCs, especially in times of economic difficulty. Judging by the comments left on the survey, it is the LRCs around the south east of England for whom cost is the biggest issue. Again, this is perhaps not a surprise as the cost of many services increases in this part of the country. However, it is also important to consider the potential for sampling bias, as it is likely that there are a higher proportion of respondents working around the south east of England.

ALERC recognises the variability of LRC costs and the difficulty this can cause some consultant ecologists. LRCs are not for profit organisations and their charges are designed to cover a proportion of their running costs. This cost can vary considerably across the country, as it does for many businesses. The important thing from ALERC’s point of view is to spread best practice amongst LRCs and therefore to improve the services that they provide and their value for money. Further results from the survey indicate that this will be an important process as 50.4% of respondents described LRC products as “quite variable” and 28.8% described them “very variable”. A similar result was found for LRC service provision (see fig.2).

Fig. 2



The survey also recorded the specific strengths and weaknesses of LRC data provision, a summary of which can be found in table 1. This part of the survey backed up earlier conclusions about the variability of LRC products and services with “sometimes a problem” being recorded against many of them. One of the areas that attracted a lot of criticism as being “usually a problem”, or “often a problem”, was the area of cost. This is not surprising as the earlier part of the survey suggested that the cost of data supply was putting some people off acquiring it.

Table 1	Usually a problem	Often a problem	Sometimes a problem	Not a problem	A strength	Not applicable
Speed of response to initial data request	2.1%	5.4%	36.7%	40.8%	13.7%	1.3%
Inclusion of "express delivery" option for clients in a hurry	1.3%	4.8%	11.1%	23.1%	24.9%	34.7%
Cost when data is acquired from an LRC and an additional source(s)	13.0%	23.3%	30.5%	13.3%	0.8%	19.1%
Cost when searches are required from more than one LRC	14.2%	22.1%	30.0%	13.4%	1.1%	19.2%
Cost in relation to overall size of your job	12.1%	21.3%	35.5%	22.1%	1.1%	7.9%
Overall value for money	8.9%	18.4%	38.7%	23.7%	6.3%	3.9%
Incentive for consultants to return data to the LRC	16.8%	23.0%	19.0%	19.5%	4.5%	17.1%

The good news is that not all cost issues are insurmountable. One such problem is where consultants have to acquire data from species interest groups and not just LRCs. I am aware of instances where LRCs and local species groups, being faced with this problem, have reached agreements that benefit both sides. In one such case, a local ornithological group is working on providing its database to the LRC, and in return it no longer has to find volunteer time to manage the database and collate the records for the annual report.

Another problem facing consultants is the cost of acquiring data where the study area crosses the boundary of more than one LRC. Again there is cause for optimism. Some LRCs have been able to reach agreements whereby they reduce their costs to prevent the consultant being charged full price for data from two LRCs. In these instances all three parties share some of the burden of the supply of data, and achieve a more satisfactory outcome as a result.

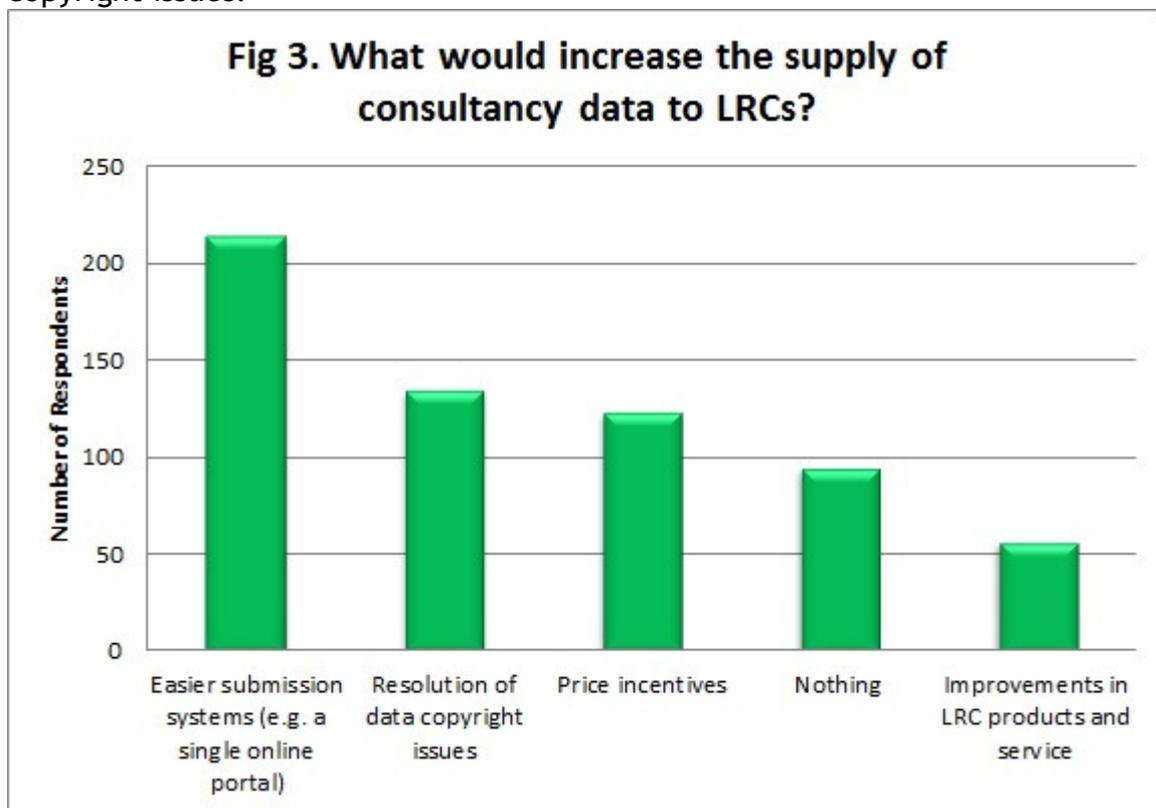
Spreading these examples of good practice is the key to improving LRC service nationally. ALERC is in a position to do this and July 2012 saw the arrival of ALERC LRC accreditation, a system whereby LRCs who conform to a set of standards are awarded basic accredited status. These are minimum standards that ensure the level of service provided is adequate, and that all the relevant data management procedures are adhered to. It is hoped that the clients of accredited LRCs will notice an improvement in service they receive from LRCs. Not only that, but confidence will grow in the LRCs movement as a whole.

One of the more startling findings from the survey was the fact that 16.8% of respondents cited "incentive for consultants to return data to the LRC" as usually being a problem, making this the most significant problem of those listed in the survey. What makes this even more surprising is that 77.7% of respondents claimed to already share data, and 88.8% of those suggested they send it to LRCs (meaning that 67.8% of consultants are already passing data to LRCs). This is a surprise to many LRCs, who suggest anecdotally that data from consultants only makes up a very small proportion of their databases. Some LRCs are known to offer inducements for consultants who are able to share their data. An LRC in Scotland offered consultants a reduction in price of 50% on the next data search if

they were able to provide records back to the LRC. Only three out of approximately forty eligible enquiries yielded any data.

Whatever the figures from this survey, the evidence from LRCs themselves strongly suggests that data collected by consultants is not being used beyond its original purpose. These records could be useful not only to local naturalists, interest groups and conservationists, but also to local authorities, national policy makers and ecological consultants themselves.

However, it is obvious that this argument is not strong enough in itself to yield consultancy data, even when economic incentives are applied. There are still barriers to overcome. These barriers have been picked up by the survey, and fig.3 summarises the attitudes and the main areas for discussion. It is clear from this summary, that a lot of people feel that a simple system for submission of records would make them more likely to submit data. There are also concerns around copyright issues.



A quick read through the comments left on the survey provides further evidence that ease of submission and copyright are the issues at the fore of most people's minds. There seems to be a lot of uncertainty surrounding data copyright. Some people are prepared to release data, but they often employ a clause in their clients' contracts that allows them to do this. Other people are less keen to go down this route, keeping client confidentiality in mind. Perhaps one resolution to this issue is to lobby local authorities, explaining to them that if they want the mass of precise, accurate data that comes from consultancy reports to be used in support of general conservation policy in their area, then there needs to be an obligation for those submitting planning applications to allow their ecological data to be shared.

Even where there is willingness to share data, there are still concerns around how much time it takes out of a consultant's day to submit records. There are often worries about what format to submit records in and where to send them. In actual fact, many LRCs will gratefully accept data in any format, although they will probably take longer to get the data inputted into their database, and made available, if they have to re-format it.

The results of the survey should leave people in no doubt that there is a requirement for a simple system that allows consultants to submit data quickly, and that doesn't result in a slow process of reformatting before it becomes available to inform future projects and developments. NBN, IEEM and ALERC are currently working on how such a system might be developed.

ALERC are also working on the issues surrounding the variability of LRC data supply. The key here, as described earlier, is to be able to share best practice and, where possible, tools and pieces of software that allow for more efficient, more detailed and more useful products to be created by LRCs. There is now a database available that lists tools and systems in use by LRCs, and it is hoped that this will encourage sharing between LRCs. In the future, it will be important to identify the barriers to achieving a higher standard of LRC output. In many cases, LRCs are under resourced or simply too small. This can be for many reasons, some are historic and some reflect local authorities' attitudes to local biodiversity recording. Where there are LRCs in a position to develop a better output, ALERC is well placed to help them, by putting them in contact with other LRCs and through the accreditation system. ALERC is also working with NBN on achieving greater use of NBN Gateway data by LRCs, meaning that the products that LRCs are able to supply are augmented by data from other contributors to the NBN. The result will be a more informative and seamless supply of data to the consultancy sector.

The theme driving this push for change is one of greater sharing of biodiversity data from all sources, making sure that records are not only available once, for the purpose or purposes they were collected, but available for future conservation work and to add to the collective knowledge of the nation's wildlife and habitats. This means putting into place the software, systems and protocols that allow records to be shared widely and efficiently. It also means eroding away the notion that records themselves are a saleable product, and that they should be hoarded by some and coveted by others. The success of LRCs will be judged on whether they can collect, format, store and share records, applying sensitivity where required and employing useful and innovative methods of presenting those records.

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