



LRC Matters

Issue 4 - December 2013

All the latest news
from around the
LRC community

Conference Season 2013



Picture courtesy of NBNTrust

Changes on the ALERC board of Directors

Mark Wills, NEYEDC

In the midst of the ALERC annual conference, the Annual General Meeting took place just after lunch. Normally the AGM is the chance for the Directors to report directly to the membership – and for the members to query and comment on - all aspects of the organisation's activities during the year. This year there were also several changes announced that significantly alter how the organisation is run. There were some changes in personnel amongst the board of Directors. Gary Lewis stepped down both as Chair and as a Director after 3 years on the board and Alexa Tweddle also stepped down as a Director and as the Scottish representative on the board. To help fill the gap, Adam Rowe was welcomed back onto the board. Adam was a founding Director of ALERC back in 2009 and served as Chair for 2 years. Nicky Court has stepped up to take on the role of Chair and her first act as Chair was to lead the conference in expressing their sincere thanks for the passion, dedication and hard work both Gary and Alexa put in during their time on the board and especially Gary during his time as chair. As part of these changes the roles required to run ALERC

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have been redistributed and an additional role of Vice-Chair formally recognised to help support Nicky as the demands on the Chair have increased over the past couple of years. The new team of ALERC officers are:

Chair – Nicky Court
 Vice-Chair – Mark Wills
 Treasurer – Eric Fletcher
 Company Secretary – Darwyn Sumner

Directors' Portfolios

A further change to the way ALERC operates was also announced during the AGM. Each Director has taken on a Portfolio of work areas for which they are responsible for leading. Some Directors have a portfolio of one area, for example the Chair only has the responsibility of Chair as their portfolio. Some of the work areas that Directors' have taken responsibility for include Membership & recruitment, National Schemes & Societies/Data Flows, LRC business development and NBN Trust Liaison. A full list of each Director's portfolio of work areas will be appearing soon on the ALERC website www.alerc.org.uk and Directors will be seeking to recruit ALERC members to contribute to their work strands via working groups. Any interested parties from other organisations are encouraged to make contact with the appropriate Director either directly or via contact@ALERC.org.uk.

ALERC Conference 2013

Chloë Smith, GiGL

Many delegates travel home from the ALERC conference each year, bleary eyed from an early morning train journey, but with a renewed sense of motivation and positivity for what we do at records centres. This is combined with the mulling over of specific challenges or technical questions encountered during the day. The 2013 Autumn Conference, held at BVSC Centre for Voluntary Action in Birmingham, was no exception. This year, organisers replaced the usual afternoon workshops with a series of short presentations and an open discussion about arising topics. Combined with the morning talks and lively soap box presentations, this meant we heard from a wide range of records centres and affiliates. Morning talks outlined the work of two records centres undertaking significant data gathering and interpretation projects: Intertidal Discovery Project by ERCCIS, surveying the northern shoreline of Cornwall, and Norfolk Species Surveillance Network by NBIS, a pilot of structured surveillance. Systematic survey is difficult to achieve on a big scale without project-specific funding, so delegates were interested to hear the successes and difficulties arising from these projects, and how funding arrangements were secured from SITA Trust and Defra, respectively. Each of the projects was reliant on dedicated volunteers, presenting opportunities for them to develop skills in biological recording and building local awareness. One of the lessons learned in Norfolk was that volunteers

tend not to work across multiple taxa and prefer to survey their local patch. Also, it's important to be aware that limited availability of people with advanced identification skills slows down data capture for certain taxa. Therefore identifying volunteers first has advantages. Soap box presentations, as always, covered a range of hot topics. We were asked to build strong user-group for Recorder 6 to help improve support for its ongoing development. There was suggestion of a mentoring scheme for LRC staff, perhaps a UK-wide women's network. Probably the biggest crowd pleaser was the plea for members to remember data is beautiful, not 'dry'. With analogies ranging from Picasso to Jimi Hendrix, discussions were colourful! As noted by twitter users following #ALERC2013, lunch was good, hence live tweeting fell silent! But lunchtime wasn't only about the well appreciated sandwiches, it also presented an opportunity for delegates to pick the brains of counterparts at different LRCs. Increasingly, knowing some friendly faces from previous conferences and a bit about what they do helps to make the most of the day in this way. The chatter of relaxed discussions about the morning's topics or shared experiences filled the conference centre foyer. In the afternoon, we returned to our seats to participate in the AGM. There have been a number of changes to roles and directors, so these were explained to the delegates. The afternoon's talks included an introduction to a clever new onlinemappinginterface developed by Biodiversity Information Service for Powys & Brecon Beacons National Park, which allows users to actively access data. Cumbria Biodiversity Data Centre gave us a 'smorgasbord' of ideas including the added value LRCs can bring to core datasets, for example with predictive modelling and sensitivity area mapping. We learned about the benefits of close interaction between invasive species work coordinators and records centres from London Invasive Species Initiative (hosted by GiGL). The final discussion, following these talks, encompassed how records centres operate in a changing world and how we respond to new challenges (invasive species, funding support, resourcing, non-expert audiences) and technological advancements (alert layers, interpretation, online access) . It included an interesting debate within



the room about open versus controlled access. And covered the potential 'disruptions' to traditional LRC business models arising from new technologies, as well as the opportunities that these present for sharing and distributing information in new and exciting ways.

NBN Conference 2013

Tom Hunt, ALERC National Coordinator

Many of you will be aware of this year's NBN conference, either because you were there (LRCs certainly seemed well represented), because you have read about it elsewhere or because you have watched the presentations on the NBN website (<http://www.nbn.org.uk/News/Latest-news/NBN-Conference-report-and-presentations.aspx>). Held in the prestigious surroundings of the Royal Society, the conference featured the usual mix of presentations and networking opportunities. The theme for the day was "future challenges for the NBN", and seemed to provide a basis for interesting and sometimes challenging discussion.

One of the most striking and interesting things about the content of the presentations generally was that they all seemed to discuss use and output of biodiversity data. It is very important to have the chance to see examples of how biodiversity data is used, as the uses are so numerous, varied and interesting. Several of the speakers stood out particularly because of their salient points or, because of the fascinating way in which they showed biodiversity data can be used. For example, Richard Fox's (of Butterfly Conservation) talk about how Lepidoptera data is used to determine and track the distribution of butterflies and moths was particularly engaging. This presentation not only looked at how data is successfully used, but also the constraints on how it can be used, and how these may be overcome. Steve Cham (of the British Dragonfly Society) also gave a lively and interesting talk on behalf of the British Dragonfly Society about the compilation of the new atlas and the Dragonflies in Focus Project.

Earlier in the day were perhaps two of the more talked about presentations amongst LRCs. Barry Gardiner MP opened proceedings with an enthusiastic address advocating the theories of natural capital and ecosystem services as the right ways to progress biodiversity conservation in the future. At the heart of this argument is the fact that biodiversity has a measurable value to the economy, and recognising this value is the first step to ensuring it is conserved for future generations.

Following Mr Gardiner's speech was Lisa Kerslake from CIEEM's Governing Board and Swift Ecology. Her presentation dwelt on Lisa's and others' experience of obtaining data from LRCs. The presentation largely looked at where she felt the system was failing, or at least not as good as it could be. She recognised that LRCs are variable and her issues apply to certain LRCs and not all. Lisa also mentioned how she is working with ALERC, NBNT and others on

the Biodiversity Data Management Group to find solutions to some of the problems she talked about. From ALERC's point of view, much of what she was talking about highlighted the need for all biodiversity data users to be better informed about the services LRCs are offering, and of course for LRCs themselves to engage with ALERC through things like accreditation, the forum and the ALERC conference.

The final presentation of the day was an upbeat look at the work of the Field Studies Council by Sue Townsend and Rich Burkmar. Training recorders is something that is critical to the future of biodiversity recording, and FSC are addressing this through a number of successful projects, such as the Invertebrate Challenge Project, which recruited ten new county recorders for Shropshire.



Picture courtesy of NBN Trust

Get the Picture

Thanks to Cofnod for sending in this picture of a great spotted woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*. The birds were spotted this summer whilst walking the Cofnod dogs Poppy and Cadi at the Parc Menai centre in north Wales. They nested and Richard Gallon was able to capture this photo of one of the adults. If you have an interesting photo you want to share, please email tom.hunt@alerc.org.uk



New County Record Captures the Attention of National Media

Tom Hunt, ALERC National Coordinator

A record from a volunteer recorder in Wiltshire has helped volunteer recorders in general, and Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre (WSBRC) specifically, get national news coverage. The recorder, Anne Appleyard, volunteers as part of a Protected Road Verge monitoring scheme and came across a maritime plant species, Sea Fern-grass *Catapodium marinum*, many miles inland on the verge of the A30 near Salisbury. Unsurprisingly, this

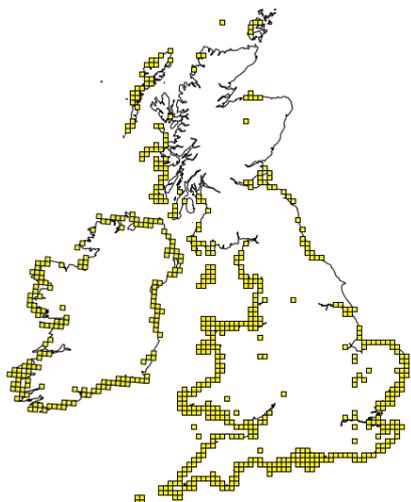


is the first record of the species for the area and has been attributed to the salty roadside conditions caused by gritting. This has caught the attention of the Western Daily Press, the Daily Mail and the BBC, all of whom have produced written articles on the subject. Anne was even featured on Radio Four's Gardners' Question Time, which you can access [here](#) (Anne is on after 14mins 25seconds).

For the full story read Vicki James's article on the WSBRC website [here](#). The Western Daily Press article can be found [here](#), the Daily Mail one [here](#), and the BBC one [here](#).

It would be great to feature more record related species in future editions of LRC Matters

so if you have something interesting to report, please get in touch via tom.hunt@alerc.org.uk.



Left, *Catapodium marinum*, courtesy of Malcolm Storey / WSBRC, and the current distribution of *Catapodium marinum* records on the NBN Gateway.

News In Brief

Accreditation update

There are three potential LRCs in the pipeline for accreditation assessments early next year. LRCs intending to go through the process and get an assessment at the earliest available opportunity should aim for some time around April or May. If you are interested in accreditation, please don't hesitate to get in touch via tom.hunt@alerc.org.uk.

In order to help progress the accreditation and make sure it stays relevant, and the process is as efficient as possible, an ALERC accreditation sub group has been formed. The group currently consists of Mark Wills, Camilla Burrow and Charlie Barnes, all of whom are from accredited LRCs and therefore have experience of the process. They are joined by Gary Lewis from ERCCIS, who has experience of accreditation systems generally and during his time as chair of ALERC developed and launched ALERC's accreditation system.

The first tasks of the group are to assess feedback from the first accreditations, look at the criteria and promote the system generally. For more information of ALERC's working groups, please visit <http://www.alerc.org.uk/alerc-working-groups.html>.

ALERC Data

Thanks to those LRCs who have completed the form on the website. Most people have now, but some haven't. Please get in touch if you need any help. The form can be found at <http://www.alerc.org.uk/lrc-data-submission.html>.

NBN Gateway version 5 Update

Paula Lightfoot, NBN Trust Data Access Officer

Following its recent upgrade, the new version of the NBN Gateway (version 5) gives better performance and stability due to the investment in servers that can cope with the increasing volume of data (now almost 100 million records) and increased usage of the system. NBN Gateway 5 is more flexible in terms of accessing and downloading data and the interactive map now makes it possible to select and query multiple records and create maps of two or more species in different colours.

There have also been improvements for the data providers, with data security and Data Exchange Principles remaining paramount. Data providers can now get more detailed information on who has been using their data

and for what purpose, which helps them to report to their stakeholders and recorders.

The new system also includes a tool for requesting access to data or downloading data within certain filters, for example a combination of spatial, taxonomic, datasets, date range and designation filters.

Some of the other major changes to the NBN Gateway are:

- All publicly available records can be downloaded and their details are available to view on screen.
- Improved download functionality – e.g. data downloads are supplied in a single table rather than a separate table per dataset. It is also possible to download whole datasets.
- You need to log in to view record details on screen or download data
- It is easier to administer datasets and organisations, deal with access requests and proactively grant access

As well as needing to log in before requesting access to data or downloading data, users now also have to state the reason for the access request or data download by selecting a use category from a dropdown list. The NBN Gateway Terms and Conditions remain the same as they were on the old website, which means that users need written permission from the data providers if they wish to use the data for commercial purposes. It is also important to note that although the NBN Gateway can provide access to many million records, 80% of these records are not fully publicly accessible, meaning that the resolution may be blurred to 10km. There remains a warning message to this effect on the website, to ensure that users contact data providers to negotiate better access to the data.

Since the launch of the new NBN Gateway, NBN Trust staff and data providers have responded to several enquiries about the terms and conditions governing use of the NBN Gateway by ecological consultants. The NBN Trust and ALERC also ran a workshop for consultants and local authority staff on 'Accessing and Using Biodiversity Data' on the 4th December as part of CIEEM's continuing professional development programme. The report of this workshop can be found later in this newsletter. Thanks to the more detailed download logs, we know the data are being used for a wide range of useful and interesting purposes, including:

- Statutory work under the Water Framework Directive requiring records of eelgrass (*Zostera marina* and *Zostera noltei*)
- Research to inform Government policy on the impact of weed control on associated biodiversity
- Surveys to locate potential species-rich/Annex 1 lowland grassland/wetland habitats in Scotland
- A large number of MSc and undergraduate student projects, for example a GIS project to analyse the change in

distribution of Grey and Red Squirrels in the UK and re-introduction methods.

- Studies of personal interest to expert amateur naturalists, including a study of aculeate Hymenoptera of sand dunes
- Conservation projects, such as habitat management work in a freshwater Local Biodiversity Action Plan project

We would also like to thank both data providers and data users for their feedback which is now helping us to improve the system. For example:

- Users were downloading or requesting access to data outside their area of interest as they were failing to apply the filters. We added the text "Please check that you have used the appropriate filters within each of the above sections to only request access to the records that you require", to the final stage of the download wizard to try to reduce these taxonomically/geographically irrelevant requests.
- Users were making duplicate downloads, perhaps because they hadn't realised their first attempt had been successful. We have added a pop-up saying 'we are preparing your download – please wait' to try to reduce duplicate downloads.
- The 'use categories' in the access request and download wizard did not cover the ways that recording schemes and societies use data from the Gateway. We plan to add a new category to the dropdown list specifically to cover this.
- Data users reported they would rather have the hybrid base map on the Interactive Map by default as this is easier for navigation. This will be introduced in the next release.

We are monitoring use of the new Gateway, and from January we will start providing monthly summary statistics on data access requests and downloads across the whole system. In the meantime, data providers can view the summary and detailed statistics for their own datasets on their "My Account" page.

The changes to the NBN Gateway meant a major update to the system and unfortunately initial teething problems were encountered, but these are now fixed. The NBN Trust thanks all the users and data providers for their patience whilst the issues were resolved and hopes that everyone is now enjoying using an enhanced NBN Gateway. If you do have any feedback or comments we would like to hear from you at access@nbn.org.uk

NBN Web Services

The NBN Gateway 5 runs off REST web services, and the REST API is available to view and download from the NBN Gateway documentation page. The SOAP web services will continue to function off the old Gateway 4 database until current users are able to migrate to the REST services, but the data accessible through the SOAP services will gradually go out of date as the old database will not be updated with new datasets. However, a necessary change

to the hardware at CEH caused unforeseen problems and led to the SOAP services and the old NBN Gateway being unavailable for several weeks from late November, despite every effort by the NBN technical team and CEH partners to resolve this quickly. The NBN Trust would like to apologise for this significant disruption of service and our failure to communicate about it. We appreciate that several LRCs use the SOAP services as part of their business operations and we are very sorry for lack of support for this service over the past few weeks. We would like to emphasise that this was not planned, and our intention is still to maintain the SOAP services until users have migrated to the REST services. A more detailed update on NBN web services is available on the NBN website.

NBN / ALERC Course for CIEEM

Tom Hunt, ALERC National Coordinator

The BVSC, familiar with ALERC conference goers, was host to another biodiversity data session, this time organised by CIEEM. Accessing and Using Biodiversity Data is a one day course prepared and delivered by the NBNT, in association with ALERC, with Paula Lightfoot and myself presenting it. The course aims to make sure that biodiversity data is being used correctly, and that users are able to get most out of it. The topics covered include explanation of the NBN Gateway terms and conditions and data access controls, LRCs and their services and how best to share data.

The course was attended by thirteen people, working for consultancies, local authorities and Natural England, and covering a wide geographical area from Glasgow to Bridgwater and many places in between. This is the second year that the course has been run, and has proved successful from an LRC point of view as it has given the chance to teach data users, such as consultants, what the constraints are on the use of NBN Gateway data and what services they can expect from an LRC. There is also a chance to discuss the workings of LRCs so that people can see the range of activities that an effective LRC needs to perform and the costs that are associated with these activities.

In the afternoon session are practical tasks, looking at data quality, reporting quality and data submission, all of which will help data users to get more out of data as well as interpreting it in a fair and useful manner.

The Role of Museums and Collections in Biological Recording

Teresa Frost, CBDC

In September 2013 I (Teresa Frost of Cumbria Biodiversity Data Centre at Tullie House Museum) and Stephen Hewitt, Curator of Natural Sciences at Tullie House Museum, presented on the synergies between Local Records Centres, museum support of recording and the long history of

biological record keeping by local museums at the Linnean Society Taxonomy and Systematics Plenary on The Role of Museums and Collections in Biological Recording. The event was attended by 70 participants representing a wide range of parties including LRCs, ALERC, museum professionals, NFBR and recorders.

It is believed that Tullie House Museum opened the world's first biological records centre, "the Natural History Record Bureau" in 1902, as reported in *The Museums Journal*, 1910. Unlike some counties, where the advent of partnership LRCs has meant museums being less involved in biological records, in Cumbria the Records Centre is still based at the museum. In his talk on Synergy between identification and recording, Steve showed how CBDC being based at the museum means that the museum is still central to the local recording community, and the benefits that brings in keeping the museum collections relevant and valued as well as helping to increase the skills of local recorders and public engagement work.

In the 1980s it was the Biological Curators Group that set the wheels in motion for the formation of the NFBR, the NBN and ALERC and in evidencing the need for a complete network of local records centres. My talk on Generating reliable biological records: Local Records Centres and Museums working together with the local recording community gave the results of a survey completed by 30 LRCs to show how varied partnership working and data flow is between LRCs and museums is now. The survey highlighted the loss of specialist curators and expertise and little emphasis by LRCs in encouraging voucher specimens or the use of reference collections. There are many LRCs who still work closely together with museums on events, data or joint projects, but these tended to be LRCs where there was a museum representative involved in the LRC at a strategic level.

The Key Conclusions from the meeting were:

- Case studies clearly demonstrate the benefits of a close relationship between museums and recorders in securing greater accuracy when determining biodiversity
- Museums want to be used and Recorders want to use museums
- But need to improve links with recorders and promote museum use (turn the viscous circle into a virtuous circle)
- Opportunities may now be arising to get better recognition of (and therefore funding support for) museum collections in relation to biodiversity and recording

A summary of the day, these talks and others from NFBR and NBN are on the Linnean Society's website at <http://tinyurl.com/linnean-recording>

A full report of my survey results of LRC and museum relationships will appear on the ALERC website. I am now working with the Natural Sciences Collections Association (NatSCA) on future developments to document UK collections for recorders and other users.