

Renowned contributor to the development of biological recording receives Honorary Membership award

The NBN Trust is delighted to have given its fifth honorary membership award to Charles Copp.

Charles is one of the small number of individuals that have contributed significantly and continuously, for a long time, to the development of biological recording in the UK and, more recently, also overseas.

A keen naturalist and geologist from an early age, he began his professional work in biological recording soon after he was appointed Assistant Curator of Natural History at Bristol Museum in 1976. Here he set up the Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC). By the early 1980s Charles was active in promoting and contributing to debate about the future of biological recording, in particular about the role of local records centres. He had developed an interest in computers during his degree course and subsequent geological research. This fortunate 'addiction' to what, at the time, was very cutting edge technology would lead to BRERC being one of the first record centres to use computers.

Charles made a typically thought-provoking contribution to an open meeting on biological recording, organised by the Biology Curators' Group at Leicester in September 1984. As a direct result of this meeting two essential steps were taken:

- A Steering Committee was set up in May 1985, chaired by Charles, which led to the formation of the National Federation for Biological Recording (NFBR) a year later.
- A request was made to the Linnean Society to set up a Working Party on biological recording, which resulted in the report *Biological Survey: Need and Network*, published in 1988. This Linnean Society report led to a meeting at the Royal Society in 1989, to which Charles contributed on behalf of local records centres, which resulted, in 1990, in the formation of the Co-ordinating Commission for Biological Recording.

Charles' work at Bristol Museum and BRERC pioneered many new initiatives and he hosted the very successful 2nd NFBR Conference in 1987. He recruited several individuals to work at BRERC, often with only short-term funding, who have gone on to play essential roles in the development of biological recording in the UK. Discussions at this 1987 conference were the catalyst for development of a prototype of Recorder by Stuart Ball.

Charles remained near the focal point in biological recording in the UK even after he left Bristol Museum and BRERC in 1989. After a couple of years with a small IT company, in 1991 he started work as a self-employed specialist in environmental information management. In this role he has built an unrivalled understanding on the information needs relating to most aspects of biological and geological recording and has helped develop the means of delivering those needs.

After a faltering start, the Co-ordinating Commission for Biological Recording (CCBR) commissioned Charles and the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology in July 1992 to jointly carry out the CCBR study. Charles was the driving force behind the development of the "mother of all questionnaires", which formed the backbone of the CCBR project; he developed the database used to analyse the results and carried out the analyses. He also co-authored the CCBR report with Sir John Burnett and Paul Harding.

In the period between completion of the CCBR report in March 1994, its publication in autumn 1995 and the early stages of the formation of the NBN, Charles consolidated his role as a specialist in environmental information management, in particular the



History (NHM), were the source for the 1:625,000 (1 inch to 10 miles), 'Watsonian Vice-counties of Great Britain' published by the Ray Society in 1963. Charles' association with the NBN Trust has included membership of committees and occasional project work including an authoritative review of the

development of Recorder and a related database for geological recording.

Over the last 10 years, he has worked with all the country conservation agencies, and many local records centres and wildlife trusts. He has made particularly important contributions to the development of the NBN through his work on Recorder, carrying out the systems analysis for what was developed as Recorder 2000 and more recently developing Web Recorder in a collaborative project with Luxembourg Museum. His work for the NBN Local Records Centre development project included entirely original proposals for accreditation of LRCs, which are typical of his forward thinking approach. Although no accreditation scheme has been set up, he applied his unrivalled knowledge of all aspects of biological recording to produce development plans for several individual LRCs, which have been successful in obtaining funding.

Charles project managed the development of highly accurate digitised boundaries for Watsonian Vice Counties on behalf of the NBN Trust. This successful project marked the 150th anniversary of the publication of the boundaries by Hewett Cotterell Watson. It built upon the work of the Systematics Association in 1947, the outcome of which was a series of carefully considered boundaries, hand-drawn onto a set of 1:63,360 scale (1 inch to 1 mile) maps. These maps, prepared by J.E. Dandy of the British Museum Natural

Trust's web site. Charles has never lost touch with the roots of biological recording, particularly at the local level, with local records centres, local natural history societies and, especially, the NFBR, of which he is currently Chairman. His experience, practicality, realism and approachability mean that he, his opinions and his work are respected by all that know him and his work.

He is, and always has been, very active within his local community in Clevedon and North Somerset, giving natural history lectures, leading field meetings and lecturing in higher education. Nor do his talents end there – his infectious sense of humour has been put to good use for many years in writing, directing and taking a leading role in annual pantomimes at Clevedon. Despite the obvious risks to the health of any normal person, he takes delight in bathing in the Bristol Channel at Clevedon and has been known to feature in icebreaking sessions in midwinter. He is devoted to his family, including wife Judy, two lovely daughters and a wide variety of cats and other livestock. They all share Charles' many interests and zest for life.

Charles was made an honorary member of the NBN Trust on 17th November 2006 and received his award in the presence of the NBN Trustees' on 20th February at the Natural History Museum.

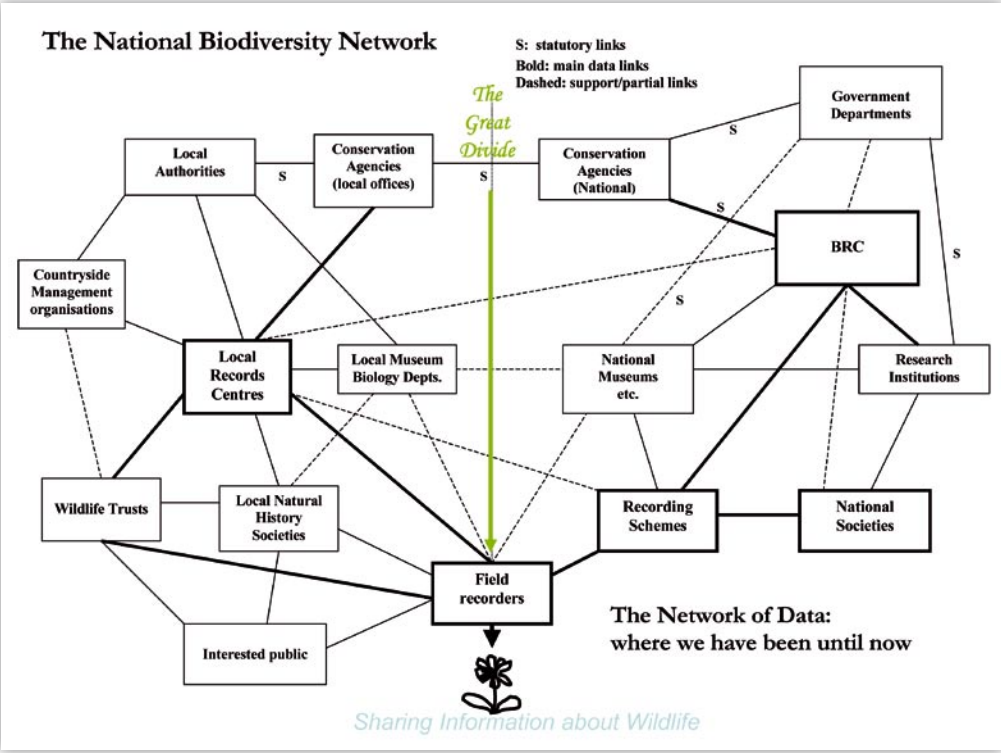
The road to sharing wildlife data

The question of who should be collecting biodiversity data, and how this should be disseminated is becoming one of the key questions in the NBN, as the Gateway develops to hold more data, and more organisations are looking to the Gateway and NBN web-services as a means for them to communicate their information.

This is nothing new, as it was predicted right back in 2000 that the Gateway would begin to affect the flows of information through the Network.

The diagram on the right was used in a contribution to the initial "launch" seminar of the NBN Trust held at the Linnean Society in London. It attempted to summarise the "flow" of wildlife data in the UK, and it quite clearly showed two things: firstly, that the local collection and use of data tended more often than not to be divorced from the data being collected and used at a national level; secondly that the common denominator in the system was the poor chap/ess at the bottom – the field worker, collecting data! He/she had to copy his/her data to all and sundry if they were to be used, and no one was paying for the effort!

Then there was the predicted picture in a few years. This was the same diagram, amended to show what, then, could be the picture if an internet Gateway was

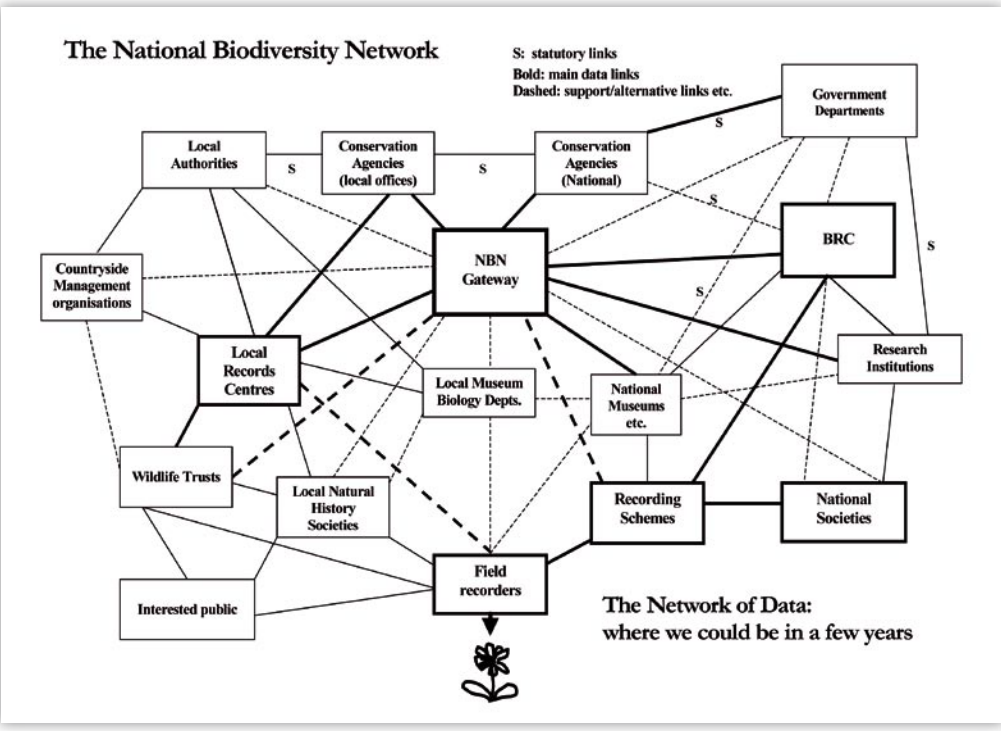


interposed. It is still a bit futuristic, in that we are not entirely there yet, but it does show two principal things. Firstly, the "Chinese wall" between what was happening at the local level and what was known

about at the national level begins to disappear. It also shows that none of the previously existing players have gone away. What has really changed are the routes through which data get from A to B.

What neither of these diagrams showed, though, was the changes in working arrangements, including processes of data collection, data checking and so on, that would need to be made. The field worker is still at the bottom, and still (potentially) sends data to more than one place. But, as the Gateway becomes a mechanism for all the participating organisations to use, there is a choice. The field worker might send their data to the local records centre or a local society Recorder, or they could send their data straight to the national Recording Scheme, in the knowledge that, eventually, the data would get on the Gateway and be available to everyone (hopefully).

If the system is to work effectively, though, there need to be agreed pathways. Data still need to be checked. National societies still need to have as complete an overview of the UK distribution as possible, so they need to be sure about data they can gain access to. Local records centres still need to be sure of the quality of the data they get, and especially to be able to gain access to detailed data so that they can be used in the conservation and planning processes. So, whichever route is the "first choice" for a particular taxonomic group, there needs to be an agreed process, and agreements about who can get detailed access to which data. If the way the subject is organised is best collated locally and then brought together at a UK level, this needs proper agreements to be made, and for data verification etc. to be put in



the right place. On the other hand, a specialist subject might best be organised through a national organiser or group direct, the data then becoming available through the Gateway to others. Whichever route data take, people should be able to see clearly where best to send their records.

The NBN Trust will be working with contributing organisations to help ease data pathways. It can offer

help in putting together agreements between organisations so that the collection of data is as smooth as possible. It also offers guidance in ways that data can be disseminated through the Gateway to minimise problems arising from restrictions on access to them.

Trevor James
NBN Development Officer