ISSUES ACTION PLAN: Maintaining Biological Records

1. OBJECTIVES

- To maintain comprehensive, accurate and up-to-date records of the wide variety of plant and animal species and their habitats which occur throughout Birmingham and the Black Country.
- To use biological records to underpin the protection of biodiversity and other nature conservation initiatives in the sub-region.

2. CURRENT ACTION

2.1. Maintaining biological records is important for a number of reasons:

- sites and species can only be protected if their presence is known;
- trends which affect the wildlife resource can best be detected through the analysis of biological data collected over time;
- priorities for action can be identified more accurately;
- research which increases our knowledge of the natural environment is often dependant on the availability of biological records;
- the effectiveness of the Birmingham and Black Country Biodiversity Action Plan can only be assessed through monitoring work. Analysis of biological records will play a key role in doing this.

This issue can be divided into three parts:

- collecting biological records;
- storing and retrieving biological records;
- using biological records.

All aspects must be addressed if biological records are effectively to be maintained.

2.2. Collecting records. The collection of records is carried out by a variety of groups, organisations and individuals. Some records come from organised and systematic survey work while others are submitted when a particular animal or plant is identified in passing. Both organised and casual records are important as both build up our knowledge of the natural environment in the local area.

Much of the collected data are submitted to ECORECORD, however, whilst ECORECORD holds over 250,000 records, there are many records which are not submitted and there is the potential for more data collection. Out of date and incomplete records are also a problem.

A comprehensive and authoritative database is essential in understanding our natural environment and this can only be achieved if the appropriate records are collected and submitted.

2.3. Storing and retrieving biological records. Nationally biological and ecological records are maintained by a network of Local Records Centres (LRCs) based on the counties throughout the UK. These may be operated by Local Authorities Planning Departments, Museums or the Wildlife Trust.

These are co-ordinated by the National Biological Records Centre (NBRC) based at the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology's research station at Monks Wood near Huntingdon.

Over the past few years, since the advent of the Lottery, there has been a project established to produce the 'National Biodiversity Network' (NBN) to increase the communication between LRCs and Monks Wood, and between LRCs themselves. It was hoped to use lottery funding to promote this ideal, but this is still in negotiation.

In Birmingham and the Black Country, biological records are maintained by ECORECORD, the Ecological database for the Black Country and Birmingham. ECORECORD was established in 1991, originally using a grant from English Nature, but is now funded by the five local authorities and operated by the Wildlife Trust and jdt-Mott-MacDonald.

ECORECORD has now developed into one of the foremost LRCs in the country utilising a combination of the English Nature Recorder database and a Geographical Information System (GIS) to store a wide variety of information regarding the regions wildlife resource.

2.4. Using records. Collecting biological records and entering them onto a database is of little use if no practical use is to be made of them. It is important therefore that the collection of records is geared to meet the needs of the users of the system. The preparation of the Biodiversity Action Plan has introduced a new group of users to ECORECORD whose needs must be accommodated.

3. EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT ACTION

The establishment and maintenance of ECORECORD as the Biological Records Centre for Birmingham and the Black Country is an important landmark in the nature conservation of the region. However, while ECORECORD is working effectively within the constraints of the resources available to it, there are problems associated with the maintenance of biological records which are briefly described below.

Collection of biological records.

- Data existing but not submitted to ECORECORD.
- Quality of records submitted variable.
- Some major groups of animals, plants and habitats are poorly represented mainly due to the small number of experts available to identify them.
- Records are not evenly spread across geographical areas or time.
- Lack of co-ordinated and strategic approach to record collection.
- Insufficient level of resources devoted to survey and collection of data.

Storing and retrieving biological records.

- Lack of up-to-date information.
- Insufficient level of resources (funding and staff).
- Reliance on volunteers.
- Out-of-date computer hardware and software.

Using biological records.

- The problems identified above mean that the information held on ECORECORD will not always meet the needs of the users.
- The software used by ECORECORD is not easy to use.
- If full use was made of EcoRecord the available resources may not be able to cope with an increased demand.

4. LEGAL ASPECTS, RESEARCH AND GUIDANCE

4.1. Legal status. National government expects local authorities to 'keep themselves informed of the state of the natural environment locally' (Planning Policy Guidance Note 9: Nature Conservation 1994) and maintaining biological records is central to this requirement. The Local Authorities are not legally obliged to operate an LRC, however, they are legally obliged to supply environmental information – the most cost effective method of maintaining and supplying this information is through an organised LRC. The Data Protection Act informs the ownership of records submitted.

4.2. Management, research and guidance. ECORECORD currently employs one member of staff and is controlled by a steering group composed of representatives from the local authorities, operators, English Nature and the voluntary sector. Volunteers are used to enter records.

It is important that ECORECORD is able to meet the needs of the organisations and groups represented on the Steering Group as well as those of other users.

ECORECORD is involved in the NBN's 'Linking Local Records Centres' project to develop standard policies and procedures to benefit Local Record Centres throughout the UK.

5. ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

Objective	Target
1. Co-ordinate and target the gathering of biological records to meet the needs of all legitimate users.	Ongoing
2. Encourage and support the collection and submission of biological records from the public, private and voluntary sectors.	Ongoing
3. Encourage a high standard of biological recording to nationally or locally agreed methodologies.	2001
4. Maintain and improve standards and procedures for the storage and retrieval of biological records.	Ongoing
5. Ensure sufficient financial and staff resources for the maintenance and development of the Local Record Centre.	2005
6. Raise the profile of EcoRecord as the sole Local Record Centre for Birmingham and the Black Country.	Ongoing
7. Use biological records to further the conservation of species and habitats.	Ongoing

6. PROPOSED ACTION WITH PARTNERS TO MEET OBJECTIVES

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number.
	Lead	**Partner**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2011**	
6.1 Policy and legislation										
Include reference to biological recording requirements within UDPs and/ or other policy documents.	LAs	WT	As UDPs and other policy documents are prepared.							2,7
Include reference to biological recording requirements within LEAPs and/ or other policy documents.	EA	LAs, WT	As LEAPs and other policy documents are prepared.							2,7
Develop standard methodologies for collecting, submitting and maintaining biological records.	ER	NBN, EN, WT, LAs	•							3,4
Develop standard procedures and good practice for the running of Local Records Centres.	NBN	ER	•	•	•					3,4
Seek accreditation of EcoRecord with National Biodiversity Network when the scheme becomes available.								(?)		1,2,3,4
Write a Development Plan for ECORECORD.	WT, LAs	ER		•				•	•	1-7
Seek increased funding for ECORECORD.	LA, WT							up 50%		5
Seek increased staffing for ECORECORD.	LA, WT			up 100%						5

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number.
	Lead	**Partner**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2011**	
6.2 Site / species protection and management										
Develop improved ways of using ECORECORD to provide information about the local ecological resource.	LAs	All	Ongoing							1,3,4,7
Produce a 'Red Data List' for the region.	LAs, ER	WT, EN		•						1,3,7
Produce register of priority habitats/ sites in accordance with criteria developed as part of Species and Habitats Protection Issues Plan.	LAs, ER	EN, WT		•						1,3,7
Ensure that records relating to threatened or vulnerable species are kept confidential if the publication of records could threaten such species.	ER	LA, EN, WT, EA	Ongoing							1,3,7
6.3 Advisory										
Use ECORECORD to provide information on the biological resource.	ER	All	Ongoing							1,2,3,7
Use ECORECORD information to monitor planning applications for conflict with nature conservation interests.	WT, LA	ER	Ongoing							1,2,3,7
Maintain liaison with adjacent biological records centres.	ER	Adjacent BRCs	Ongoing							1,2,3,4,7

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number.
	Lead	**Partner**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2011**	
Provide training on the identification and submission of wildlife records for all taxa but especially for 'difficult' taxa.	WT, LAs	Local Conservation Groups				•				2
Provide training to the general public on the submission of general wildlife records.				•						2
6.4 Future research and monitoring										
Assist in production of Birmingham and Black Country Flora.	WT	ER, LCG	•	•						1,3,7
Identify co-ordinated resurvey work required in the region and work to secure partnerships and resources to carry out and maintain a programme of survey work.	LAs	WT, ER		•						1,3,7
Identify poorly covered taxa/ areas without up-to-date records to inform survey priorities.	LCG	WT, ER	•							1,3,7
Maintain ECORECORD at the forefront of recording including the most advanced recording techniques	LAs	WT, ER	Ongoing							1-6
6.5 Communications and Publicity										
Promote voluntary sector recording.	WT, LAs	ER	Ongoing							2
Promote increased use of ECORECORD.	WT, LAs	All	Ongoing							2

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number.
	Lead	**Partner**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2011**	
Produce local atlases of species and habitats.	ER	WT, LAs, LCG		•				•	•	1,3,7
6.6 Links with other Action Plans.										
The implementation of this Action Plan has links with all Issues, Species and Habitat Action Plans.										

7. CO-ORDINATION AND REVIEW

This Biodiversity Action Plan will be implemented over 10 years with a first review after 5 years. A group will be set up to co-ordinate implementation and to report to the Biodiversity Steering Group. This group will meet at a minimum on a yearly basis.

Review will be carried out in conjunction with related Habitat and Species Action Plans as appropriate.

Review will consist of measuring achievement of targets. The group will, with the support of the Steering Group, develop and implement appropriate monitoring methods which will inform the review process.

The Action Plan will be revised and updated in the light of review results and any relevant changes in circumstances and/or additional information which becomes available during the review period.

In line with national guidance, the Steering Group will report to the UK Steering Group.