

**Minutes of the 17th Meeting of The UK Biodiversity Research
Advisory Group**

Held 23rd June 2011

Location: Defra, Nobel House, London, and by telephone conference.

In attendance: Helen Baker (JNCC)
Peter Costigan (Defra – Chair)
Andrew Pullin (BES, University of Bangor)
Mark Spencer (Natural History Museum – am only)
Mark Stevenson (Defra)
Tina Yates (JNCC)
Kevin Watts (Forest Research)

By phone conferencing:
Sallie Bailey (Forestry Commission)
Ian Bainbridge (SNH)
Mary Gibby (RBGE)
Andrew Impey (NERC)
David Townshend (NE)

Apologies: Steve Chambers (Welsh Government), Joanna Drewitt (Scottish Government), Mike Fay (Kew Gardens), Liz Howe (CCW), Scot Mathieson (SEPA), Davy McCracken (SAC), David McDonald (WildCRU, University of Oxford), Ken Norris (NERC Biodiversity Thematic Programme), Amanda Read (BBSRC), Allan Watt (CEH), Mark Wright (N Ireland).

**17.1. Biodiversity Strategies. Ref information paper BRAG 17.1, Natural England White Paper;
The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature.**

17.1.1 There was a brief summary of the launches of the NEA (National Ecosystem Assessment, see <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/>) and the NEWP (Natural Environment White Paper). The NEA launch was presented by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Caroline Spelman MP, and the Minister for Government Policy, Oliver Letwin MP. Their speeches talked about how the NEA changes the whole basis of how the economic values of biodiversity are perceived, changing the focus from individual species to an increasing awareness of the values for assemblages. The launch of the NEWP came a week after the NEA launch, and was also launched by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. (See <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/>)
The NEWP contains a strong strand of monitoring and reporting, and making information more accessible and coherent. The NEWP also announced the creation of Nature Improvement Areas in response to the Lawton review, “Making Space for Nature” (see <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf>).
The NEWP has details for a pilot scheme on biodiversity offsetting, and the formation of the Natural Capital Committee, which will provide advice to Government, and the creation of Local Nature Partnerships.

17.1.2 Discussion centred on what the NEA and the White Paper mean for the research landscape, and for which groups or people UK BRAG liaison is most appropriate. It was noted that Scotland is likely to be following with its own white paper in a few months.

17.1.3 Helen Baker said that she had done work recently for the Joint Committee on possible transformations in land and sea management over next 10 years and evidence needs. She offered to share this work with UK BRAG.

ACTION: Helen Baker and Tina Yates to circulate Joint Committee paper.

17.1.4 JNCC has just started work looking at use of survey data in ecosystem services characterisation and evaluation. Their aim is to hold a workshop in

September, to identify both data gaps and gaps in the use of data for modelling. More information will be available nearer the time.

- 17.1.5 Defra has recently updated its Evidence Investment Strategy (see <http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13471-eis-110427.pdf>) which takes account of the new government, and the reductions in public spending. The meeting noted that Defra now have evidence strategies rather than research strategies. Work will be continuing on natural value and natural environment economics. NERC will be doing work to build expertise in environment valuation. Demands on the research base are likely to increase.
- 17.1.6 A conclusion was that the challenge is on the research community to ensure that the maximum value is obtained from existing work, and that communication amongst different groups is fostered. There is an opportunity at the moment to press hard for increased integration of data sets.
- 17.1.7 There was discussion about citizen science activities and their contribution to data gathering. A challenge is identifying what data can be gathered by volunteers, and how to direct effort to obtain data of maximum value. Such activities also present IT opportunities; for example smart phone apps.
- 17.1.8 There is need to ensure the best use and full accessibility of all existing data – some historic data collected prior to the 1980s may not be accessible to all because the data are not on computer. The NHM is re-curating some old material with this in mind, as much useful data exists. It was noted that it does take financial commitment and resources to obtain the staff time for people to physically assess old records, and to digitise them. There are data for example that are not yet in the NBN.
- 17.1.9 Questions should be asked independently and objectively and then those questions mapped against existing data, to ascertain where there are data gaps. The NERC funded pilot virtual observatory project will go some way to doing this, (see <http://www.environmentalvirtualobservatory.org/> and <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/programmes/virtualobservatory/>). It is initially focusing on water – soil systems and river catchments.
- 17.1.10 The meeting noted that Stewart Stevenson MSP is the new Scottish Government Minister for Environment and Climate Change. His intention is for there to be a refresh of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy by the end of the current financial year. Ian Bainbridge (SNH Head of Science) is Chair of Scotland's Biodiversity Science Group, which wants to focus more on future needs. The Scottish Government and SEPA are sponsoring the development of a Scottish Environment web site.
- ACTION: Ian Bainbridge to send Tina Yates url of web site for inclusion in final minutes.**
- 17.1.11 CAMERAS (A Co-ordinated Agenda for Marine, Environment and Rural Affairs Science) is also trying to develop a coordinated approach in Scotland with the emphasis on citizens helping with natural environment data, including work on inventories and data sharing. CAMERAS also recently launched a marine science strategy for Scotland and published papers on terrestrial and freshwater research needs; a paper on monitoring, linked to UK Environmental Observation Framework (UK EOF), is due for publication soon; (see <http://www.camerasscotland.org/>).
- 17.1.12 In Wales, the Natural Environment Framework process is well underway, with several parallel initiatives. See <http://www.werh.org/nef.php.en>
- 17.1.13 In N.Ireland the intention is to review their biodiversity strategy, but timescales are not yet known.
- 17.1.14 The discussion on the different country initiatives had been quite wide ranging, and comments were made that in using the voluntary sector to collect data, leadership is needed to set priorities and to direct how data collection is mobilised. UK BRAG is not a funding body, so can only influence, most notably through its sub groups. JNCC is setting up a UK Surveillance Strategy Group looking at why data is needed and how it can best be used. There are some good examples of NBN (National Biodiversity Network) data being used in research – with Lichen data for example. SNH is currently funding older data being put into electronic format.

17.1.15 As a final conclusion, it was noted that data on habitats does exist, but not in readily available formats. A challenge is how to make that data available. Examples of good use of technology are needed, so that these can be publicised as one way of facilitating exchange of best practice.

2. International activity

17.2.1 KNEU (working title Knowledge Network for EUropean expertise on biodiversity and ecosystem services) has started, as part of Framework Programme 7. The final name is Biodiversity Knowledge. See <http://www.biodiversityknowledge.eu/> The concept is that it will identify a network of data providers at EU level, and will create a mechanism to collect and synthesise data in response to policy questions. Identifying the data providers is well underway, and there is a prototype mechanism for responding to policy and evidence needs from the diverse ways in which data are gathered and synthesised across the EU. The mechanism is to be tested on case studies as part of the next stage of the project.

17.2.2 SPIRAL (Interfacing Biodiversity and Policy see <http://www.spiral-project.eu/>) is another Framework Programme 7 that is now underway. It will examine Science Policy Interfaces between biodiversity research and policy to draw lessons and improve the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

17.2.3 The idea is that SPIRAL, KNEU, and BiodivERsA will all work together and be complementary in improving evidence and policy-relevant advice at an EU level. The European Commission has recently launched a call for the creation of an EU biodiversity and ecosystem services platform.

17.2.4 BiodivERsA has so far had two calls for research proposals, and is currently planning a further call in November 2011, which will focus on "biodiversity dynamics: developing scenarios, identifying tipping points and improving resilience" See <http://www.biodiversa.org/> . Future calls are likely to include origins of loss in biodiversity and understanding alien species.

17.2.5 NERC was involved in funding the first call of BiodivERsA projects, but currently the Research Councils need to be able to show clear added value before investing in any EU projects, though the RCs are still keen to participate if they can find opportunity to join EU research.

17.2.6 There was discussion as to whether UK BRAG could circulate suggestions (to likely funders) of research that could be worked into a proposal for submission to BiodivERsA, in advance of the formal calls for proposals. As timing is often tight the further in advance that potential partners receive notification, the more likely it is that a formal specification for a proposal can be submitted. With this in mind, UK BRAG members should circulate information as soon as they have any knowledge of firm topics for the 2013 call.

17.2.7 Helen Baker reminded delegates of the IPBES (Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) workshop being held in London on 5th July. The UK has been very influential in pushing the IPBES agenda, and is playing a leading role, including agreeing some funding. As IPBES work is likely to be via existing national programmes, the 5th July meeting is to look at how the UK scientific community can most effectively engage in future work.

17.3. UK NEA launch

17.3.1 The meeting noted that the findings of the UK NEA (National Ecosystem Assessment) had been launched by Caroline Spelman MP, on 2nd June 2011. See paragraph 1.1 above and <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/Resources/tabid/82/Default.aspx> for the synthesis of the key findings.

17.4. BES - BRAG special session. Ref. information Paper BRAG 17.2

17.4.1 Tina Yates reported that there had already been a lot of interest in the special session, "What next for the UK NEA and IPBES?" which will be held at the BES Annual Meeting on

September 13th 2011. All the speaker slots had been filled, with Prof. Steve Albon and Dr Andy Stott giving the keynote presentations.

17.5. Potential future work

17.5.1 There was discussion on how to collate, refine and interpret, lists of research that is currently taking place, so that potential funders can see how future research could complement and move on from current research, and to foster future collaborations. Difficulties are the need to trawl LWEC and ERFF data bases, which are not always up to date, and then how to include NGOs, learned societies, and citizen science activities. While it is easy to see published research, it is much harder to find out what is currently underway and not yet published.

17.5.2 There was consensus that there is need for a register of ongoing funded research, comparable with that for the health sector. A data base that collates existing research, and that also incorporated an interpretative element would be the ideal. It was agreed that a UK BRAG sub group would do a trial to see what might be possible, with the idea of drawing up a specification for a biodiversity research data base.

ACTION: Peter Costigan to Chair sub group. Andrew Impey to be a member, and Helen Baker to explore potential for JNCC programmer input.

17.5.3 Discussion then moved on to Green Infrastructure (GI), which is now embedded in EU and country strategies. This looks at research needs from a different perspective. Forest Research and Defra are creating a web portal relating to GI. There was agreement to convene a sub group to look at the issue.

ACTION: JNCC (Ed Mountford) to draft terms of reference and circulate to BRAG for consideration; BRAG to decide inter-sessionally on need for a sub-group and let JNCC know. Kevin Watt to send Helen Baker Forest Research contact details (Tony Hutchings). David Townshend to find out who the appropriate NE person would be and send details to Tina Yates/ Helen Baker. Andrew Pullin to ask BES about interest in GI and whether an appropriate person should be invited to join group. JNCC approach the landscape group at Sheffield to enquire about an appropriate academic.

17.6. Future of BRAG – report of discussion with UKSC and LWEC

17.6.1 The UK Biodiversity Partnership Steering Committee (UKSC) is changing. As UK BRAG reports to the UKSC, there is a need to know where UK BRAG fits with the new streamlining of governance structures. Peter Costigan has been talking to Andrew Watkinson, Director of the LWEC (Living with Environmental Change) programme, and Ken Norris, Leader of NERC's Thematic Programme on Biodiversity, about biodiversity research coordination.

17.6.2 Several questions were posed to stimulate discussion;

- Should there be an open invitation for anyone to be on the UK BRAG emailing list for information items?
- Should we revisit the Terms of Reference for UK BRAG?
- Do we still think that UK BRAG serves a useful purpose?
- Should there be open calls for sub group members, rather than the current system of nomination and invitation?

17.6.3 There was consensus that UK BRAG still has a useful role, in particular with outputs from the sub groups. But that it is not easy to trace the impact that UK BRAG has. It would be useful in future for sub groups to give thought at the outset as to how their findings and outputs are going to be communicated to funders, and the impact judged. It would also help hugely if outputs were designed to be published in peer review journals – this would also be an incentive for very busy, pressured people to get involved.

17.6.4 There was support for having an open emailing list.

ACTION: Chair and secretariat to discuss practicalities and consider the possibility of an announcement at the BES-BRAG event in September.

17.7. Sub Groups.

17.7.1 Reviews – ref. draft paper for approval (previously circulated) BRAG 17.3

The Reviews sub group paper was approved, with one minor amendment, and, subject to amendment, can now be put on the UK BRAG web site. BRAG thanked Tina Yates and Andrew Pullin for their work on the guidance.

ACTION: Andrew Pullin to make amendment, Tina Yates to put paper and information on website. (Done).

17.7.2 Forestry and Woodland – ref. paper BRAG 17.4, Draft Terms of Reference

The first meeting of the group is likely to tweak the Terms of Reference in light of previous discussion (see 6.3 above), and to consider including wood pasture. The political situation and time pressures make this a difficult sub group to take forward at the moment, and there was discussion as to whether this was currently UK BRAG business critical. It was agreed that UK BRAG members on the sub group would have a telephone conference to discuss finalising the Terms of Reference, and the possibility of commissioning a review given the very limited money likely to be available for such a review. The Chair suggested that the sub-group discuss possibilities for funding a review with colleagues in Defra. UK BRAG will then reassess whether or not the sub group can be delayed, at the December meeting.

ACTION: Secretariat to organise telephone conference, and to include the sub group as an agenda item at the next UK BRAG meeting.

17.7.3 Taxonomy

The NERC review on taxonomy and systematics, Chaired by Charles Godfray, has now been published. The UK BRAG sub group will be reading this before drawing up its own report.

ACTION: Secretariat to circulate NERC review with details of who to contact for any individual comments. (done)

17.7.4 Agriculture and Aquaculture

Time constraints have delayed the start of this sub group.

ACTIONS: Secretariat and Davy McCracken to draw up draft terms of reference and organise an initial telephone conference.

Peter Costigan to send Tina Yates contact details for David Cooper of Defra's FFG.

17.8. Draft note of December phone conference for approval.

17.8.1 The note of the December meeting was approved. All actions had been completed or were underway.

17.9. Any other Business, Date, time, place, format of next meeting.

17.9.1 There was no further business. The next meeting will follow a similar format, with a London "hub" and members either phone conferencing or video conferencing from local hubs. Secretariat to trawl for dates.

Summary of actions:

Action no.	Reference in minutes	Description	Action
1.	17.1.3	To circulate Joint Committee paper on possible transformations in land and sea management over next 10 years and evidence needs.	Helen Baker/ Tina Yates
2.	17.1.10	To send Tina Yates url of Scottish Environment web site for inclusion in final minutes.	Ian Bainbridge
3.	17.5.2	Convene sub group to explore idea of drawing up a specification for a biodiversity research data base and to explore potential for JNCC programmer input.	Peter Costigan/ Andrew Impey/ Helen Baker
4.	17.5.3	To explore idea of sub group looking at Green Infrastructure (GI). Draft terms of reference and circulate to BRAG for consideration. Ask BES about interest in GI and whether an appropriate person should be invited to join group. Approach	Ed Mountford (JNCC), Forest Research person (Kevin Watt supply contact details - done) NE person (David Townshend supply

		the landscape group at Sheffield to enquire about an appropriate academic.	contact details) Andrew Pullin enquire about BES interest. JNCC person enquire of landscape group at Sheffield.
5.	17.6.4	To discuss practicalities of having an open emailing list, and consider the possibility of an announcement at the BES-BRAG event in September.	Peter Costigan/ Secretariat
6.	17.7.1	Make minor amendment to Review paper and put on website.	Andrew Pullin/ Tina Yates (done)
7.	17.7.2	To organise phone conference meeting of Forests sub group	Secretariat/ Forests sub group members
8.	17.7.3	To circulate NERC review on taxonomy and systematics with details of who to contact for any individual comments.	Secretariat (done)
9.	17.7.4	To draw up draft terms of reference for Agri and Aqua sub group, and organise initial phone conference.	Davy McCracken/ Secretariat
10.	17.7.4	To send secretariat contact details for David Cooper of Defra's FFG	Peter Costigan