

MINUTES

8th Meeting of The UK Biodiversity Research Advisory Group Tuesday 5th December 2006 Defra, Whitehall Place, London

Present: Peter Costigan (Chair), Sallie Bailey (Forestry Commission), Tim Blackstock (Countryside Council for Wales), Kevin Charman (English Nature), Mike Fay (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew), Richard Ferris (JNCC), Michel Kaiser (University of Bangor), Pamela Kempton (NERC), Havard Prosser (National Assembly for Wales), Paul Leonard (Defra), Davy McCracken (Scottish Agricultural College), Andrew Pullin (Wildlife & Countryside Link), Paul Rose (JNCC), Mark Spencer (Natural History Museum), Andy Stott (Defra), Michael Usher (University of Stirling), Allan Watt (CEH), Kevin Watts (Forest Research).

Apologies: Mark Bailey, Ian Bainbridge, Richard Brand-Hardy, Mary Gibby, Scot Mathieson, Havard Prosser, Martin Sharman, Sarah Webster, Mark Wright.

1. Welcome

Peter Costigan welcomed members to Whitehall Place, for the 8th Meeting of UK BRAG and the first following the review and approval of the new Terms of Reference by the Biodiversity Partnership Standing Committee.

2. Minutes of the last meeting

With a few minor amendments, these were approved as a true record of the 7th BRAG meeting, 08 June 2006.

3. Matters arising

The majority of these had been dealt with, with the following still to be addressed in full:

ACTION 3.1 (previous ACTION 3.2): The secretariat to discuss taking forward systematics research with the GTI National Focal Point and with the National Biodiversity Network (as the node for GBIF in the UK). BRAG agreed to keep this action live, maintaining close contact with the GECC Global Biodiversity Sub-Committee (GBSC) and pending completion of papers for GBSC by the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and the Natural History Museum (due on 6th February).

ACTION 3.2 (previous ACTION 4.5): Secretariat to forward a copy of the Ecosystem Function Report to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, by 15th January.

ACTION 3.3 (previous ACTION 8.3): BRAG members to provide the secretariat with a list of key contacts within their organisations, to form the basis of a circulation list, by 26th January.

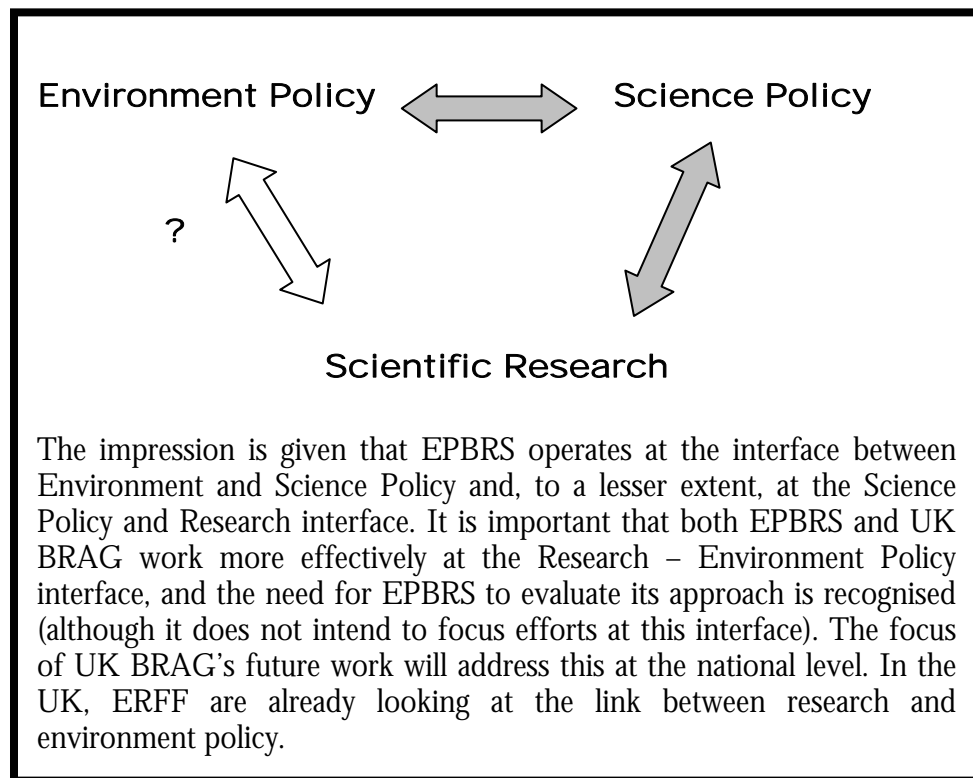
4. Future of EPBRs

At the most recent meeting, in Helsinki, 16-19 November 2006, EPBRs undertook a review of its mission and aims. Andrew Stott provided a brief overview of these, to emphasise the

importance of continued UK BRAG engagement with EPBRS. The programme of future meetings was outlined.

Allan Watt introduced the new EPBRS support mechanism, BioStrat, funded via Framework Programme 6. This aims to provide support to EPBRS and national biodiversity platforms, for the period 2006-2009. While EPBRS will be responsible for identifying themes for meetings, BioStrat will be responsible for coordinating preparatory papers (e.g. National reviews prepared by national biodiversity platforms) and running e-conferences in advance of the meetings themselves.

The need for some performance measures was highlighted, to demonstrate how EPBRS has impact at a national level (in addition to the EU level). Concern was expressed that BRAG members need to be more accountable to their organisations, particularly when engaging with European initiatives. In addition, EPBRS needs to consider the most effective delivery mechanisms for its work.



In order for the National Platforms (i.e. BRAG) to prepare national-level reviews, there needs to be some clarity concerning the level of input needed. The view of the BioStrat project is that these reviews should be short and well focused. The need for a baseline understanding of what research has been carried out on a particular theme is recognised.

5. UK BRAG Terms of Reference and Future Workplan

Peter Costigan gave a report on the BRAG Review process and the Terms of Reference working group actions. The revised Terms of Reference (aims, operating methods, and performance measures) were presented for discussion.

Text Revisions

It was felt that there was a need to expand the footnote concerning HAPs and SAPs, in order to explain how and by whom their needs will be addressed. In addition, the link between UK BRAG and EPBRS needs to be made more explicit. It was proposed that the need for UK

BRAG members to take a more pro-active role in promoting the Group's work should be given greater emphasis within the Terms of Reference, e.g. by making this the first bullet-point within the *Operating Methods* section.

Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories

The need to clarify UK BRAG's role in relation to the Crown Dependencies and the Overseas Territories is recognised. To some extent, GBSC is addressing the needs of the OTs and this role is recommended within the Biodiversity Partnership report on UK BRAG. However, there are strong ecological arguments for including the Crown Dependencies within the scope of UK BRAG's work.

ACTION 5.1: Secretariat, Defra, SEERAD, and JNCC to discuss the respective roles of UK BRAG and GBSC in relation to the Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories, and clarify their responsibilities, by 26th January.

Membership

Much of UK BRAG's work to date has focused on scientific research, but is now likely to take a different direction, requiring a review of membership. However, research is not static, and so there will still need to be (infrequent) reviews.

A brief discussion identified a number of possible new members, including ESRC, BBSRC, The Linnean Society, The Royal Society, and the Biosciences Federation. Clarification was sought concerning the decision by Wildlife and Countryside Link (WCL) to leave UK BRAG. It was explained that a major issue was WCL's disappointment at UK BRAG's apparent lack of influence over funders, coupled with a need to underpin support for the needs of the UK BAP at the level of individual HAPs and SAPs. The Group should consider writing to WCL, asking them to reconsider the decision to withdraw.

ACTION 5.2: Peter Costigan to write to WCL on behalf of UK BRAG, inviting them to continue as members of the Group, by 26th January.

In addition, UK BRAG needs to ensure improved links to individual Country Biodiversity Groups. The formation of a Business Coordination Sub-Group, made up of individuals with direct links to these Groups, aims to meet this need. A decision needs to be taken as to which Country Groups need to be represented. Although each country has a Group, comprising NGOs and Govt. departments, a line of communication is needed with Lead Partners reporting at a national level. Therefore, it is important that all four countries plus the UK to be represented.

ACTION 5.3: Defra, SEERAD/SNH, JNCC, CCW/NAW, NE, and EHS/DOENI to provide nominations for the Sub-Group to the secretariat, by 2nd February.

Communications

The need for UK BRAG's future work to focus on communications is recognised. In order to do this most effectively, the Group needs to find both UK and European partners to work with in partnership.

The meeting discussed several specific points in relation to this, identifying both the wider biodiversity community and the research community itself as being key audiences, e.g. influencing researchers when they make responsive mode funding applications to the Research Councils. However, the impression is given that responsive mode applicants seldom make reference to UK BRAG (or EPBRS) recommendations. To improve the situation, NERC could provide more help to the research community, e.g. by directing them towards UK BRAG's work.

The NERC Terrestrial and Freshwater Sciences (TFS) Listserv could provide UK BRAG with a useful mechanism for communicating outputs with a wider audience, e.g. especially when the UK BRAG Report, 2003-2006 is completed.

ACTION 5.4: Pamela Kempton to explore the possibility of UK BRAG making use of the TFS Listserv facility and report back to the secretariat, by 26th January.

Specific actions include:

- An annual report of UK BRAG's work
- A UK BRAG science conference, as part of the BES Annual Meeting
- A revised website (see later)

A partnership with the BES could be very effective, and a short additional paper was presented. There was general support for the proposal that UK BRAG should consider organising a side meeting within the BES Annual Meeting.

ACTION 5.5: The secretariat to discuss plans with Nick Dusic (BES), to agree a timetable for involvement with the 2007 Annual Meeting in Glasgow, by 2nd February.

Influencing research funders

In addition to improving communication, thought needs to be given to how UK BRAG can facilitate uptake of research proposals. The Group needs to be able to influence research funders, and there was some concern that no measures exist to enable UK BRAG to assess impact in doing this. It was recognised, however, that UK BRAG reports have been picked and their recommendations used within Defra, most notably in development of the new Evidence and Innovation Strategy. The SEERAD Research Strategy picks up on some of UK BRAG's cross-cutting themes, and the next Strategy can be expected to feature these even more strongly. For each of SEERAD's cross-cutting themes, "champions" have been identified, and UK BRAG papers are being fed into this development process. Although NERC's focus is not on the delivery of research to meet a specific policy need, it was pointed out that UK BRAG had made important submissions to NERC's Strategy Panels, thereby influencing its future direction.

It is crucial that UK BRAG has a clear view of who it needs to influence.

ACTION 5.6: UK BRAG members to advise the secretariat of the key people within their communities (as opposed to within their own organisations, see 3.3), by 26th January.

Agreeing a Workplan

UK BRAG needs to adopt a more active role in mapping out the UK research landscape. This is a new requirement for the Group, and is likely to require significant engagement from members in addition to the secretariat.

In addition to this, there are a number of cross-cutting research issues that need to be drawn out of the work that UK BRAG has completed to date. These need to be identified and prioritised.

ACTION 5.7: Secretariat to identify the cross-cutting issues from the BRAG Report, 2003-2006 (BRAG 8/5, this meeting), and develop into a summary section of the Report, by 31st January.

Funding of UK BRAG

From 1st April 2007, UK BRAG will be supported via Defra's Grant in Aid settlement to JNCC. This should offer greater flexibility in the way in which the Group operates. There are

opportunities to increase and widen the funding base for UK BRAG (i.e. for additional contributions from members), and this might include support in kind, e.g. contributions of time to assist in report-writing.

6. Genetic Conservation sub-group

Mike Fay (RBG Kew) provided a report on the activities of the sub-group, set up to consider the recommendations contained within the report of the joint UK BRAG / UKPopNet workshop¹, and draft a research priorities paper for inclusion in the BRAG Report, 2003-2006.

The secretariat has already drafted Terms of Reference for this sub-group, and issued the workshop report for consideration. The scope of this exercise has been queried, with reference to whether research concerned with plant varieties and animal breeds should fall within the remit of the sub-group. This was discussed and it was considered that these should only be included if originating from species native to the UK.

A sub-group has been constituted, including expertise from both the plant and animal genetics research communities. The sub-group has yet to report, and it was suggested that it should focus on highlighting any remaining important gaps in the workshop report, and then attempt to prioritise the revised list of proposals. The sub-group should avoid undertaking any new work at this stage, due to the timeframe within which a report is required. Therefore, it should be seen as an interim statement of research needs, recognising that UK BRAG can revisit this topic in the future.

ACTION 6.1: Sub-group to review the workshop report and send a first draft of their findings to the secretariat, by 22nd December. This should be revised and a final draft (for inclusion in the BRAG Report, 2003-2006) agreed by 19th January.

7. Climate Change Adaptation sub-group

Richard Ferris (JNCC) presented a summary of the main research programme themes identified by the sub-group, and outlined in its report (BRAG 8/4). A number of specific comments were made, and will be addressed by the secretariat.

General points:

- Removal of some of the detail for each project (move to annexes)
- Reduction in the number of programme headings, to eliminate repetition
- Greater alignment with the EPBRS Aviemore Statement (i.e. use of comparable section headings)

The document needs to focus on the main messages for research funders, and it should be made clear that it is not the sum total of UK BRAG's thinking on the subject. It is important to draw attention to the range of generic issues considered in the development of the report, and there needs to be a clear statement of intent in terms of carrying this work forward.

ACTION 7.1: Andrew Stott (Defra) to advise the secretariat on the role of CEH in revising the report, and contribute to the editing process. A revised draft to be completed by 22nd December.

8. BRAG Report 2003-2006

¹ Gregory, A., Burke, T., Ferris, R., Robson, J., Smithers, R., and Whitlock, R. (2006) *The conservation of genetic diversity: science and policy needs in a changing world*. JNCC Report No. 383. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough.

Richard Ferris (JNCC) presented the paper (BRAG 8/5) for discussion. It is intended as a high-level summary of the cross-cutting themes addressed by UK BRAG between 2003-2006; any readers requiring more in-depth information can refer to the individual sub-group reports (available from the UK BRAG website).

The suggestion was made that the cross-cutting themes should be presented in a different order (i.e. not chronological, as at present), and cross-linkages between them should be identified. However, the scale of this task was acknowledged, and a proposal made that a number of examples be picked-out (instead of a full analysis) to illustrate key points.

The report should concentrate on the programme level, removing the specific numbering of individual projects. Instead, these should be replaced with a short block of text. In order to link to the sub-group reports, it was suggested that hyperlinks be added to the document. In addition, the report needs to include a “next steps” section.

A proposal was made that UK BRAG’s research priorities could form the basis of a paper in *The Journal of Applied Ecology*. If this is to be explored, it is important for the Group to be completely open about the methodology used to arrive at the list of research proposals. The benefit of making clear UK BRAG’s links to the BES (and the BES Annual Meeting) was recognised.

ACTION 8.1: Davy McCracken (SAC) to discuss the proposal with other J. Appl. Ecol. Editors, and notify the Secretariat of their response, by 26th January.

ACTION 8.2: All UK BRAG Members to send their comments on the draft report by 23rd January.

9. BRAG Website

Richard Ferris (JNCC) gave a short presentation, outlining plans for a complete revision of UK BRAG’s web presence, establishing a specific website (with the domain names ukbrag.org and ukbrag.org.uk) and providing a clearer, more concise content with an emphasis on the Group’s outputs, i.e. the reports. The plan to develop a UK BRAG logo, in order to give the Group a clear identity independent of any single member organisation, was also described.

It was suggested that a comments box, or at least an e-mail address, should be provided, to enable visitors to give their views. An e-mail address ukbrag@jncc.gov.uk would be set up for this purpose, and checked on a regular (i.e. weekly) basis.

The new website was expected to be complete and in operation (at least for UK BRAG members) by the beginning of February.

10. Report on Helsinki EPBRS Meeting

Andrew Stott (Defra) provided an outline of the Hanasaari Declaration on Biodiversity Research, emphasising that this type of statement has an important impact at a political level. In addition, three EPBRS Statements:

- Actions for the 2010 Biodiversity Target in Europe
- Urban Ecology and Biodiversity in Europe
- Biodiversity Education

were introduced and discussed. UK BRAG needs to consider how to make best use of EPBRS Statements, and it was suggested that the Group should take on a greater role in disseminating these within the UK research and policy communities.

Although EPBRS does not have access to research funding, it has a subtle influence on thinking within the European Commission, e.g. the latest Framework Programme 7 Call includes references to EPBRS Statements. European Commission officials draw upon EPBRS documents to help them when drafting research programmes.

11. BiodivERsA Report

Richard Ferris (JNCC) outlined the progress that has been made by the BiodivERsA project towards developing themes and protocols for a Common Call (to be issued in November-December 2007). It was noted that NERC would require a persuasive argument as to why it should contribute funds to this Call. The value in addressing important ecological issues at a wide biogeographical scale was put forward as one way of gaining added value. The opportunity to tap into and share a greater range of expertise was also recognised.

There was a feeling that greater focus is required for the Call, rather than the broad headings used at present.

ACTION 11.1: The secretariat to provide feedback to BiodivERsA partners, prior to their meeting in Paris on 24/25th January.

12. GBSC Report

Richard Ferris (JNCC) gave a short report on the progress made by the GECC Global Biodiversity Sub-Committee (GBSC). Andrew Stott (Defra) referred to the systematics issue that had been highlighted by members of the GBSC. This is currently awaiting a series of papers from the Natural History Museum (Chris Lyall), The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (Eimear nic Lughada), and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (Mary Gibby), which will be presented to the next GBSC meeting on 6th February. Once these have been received, it will be possible to make a decision about the relative roles of UK BRAG and GBSC.

13. AOB

Paul Leonard (Defra) informed Members of a meeting – “STUMBLE: Statistical Uncertainty in Biodiversity”, being co-organised with the Natural History Museum in March 2007. For further details, contact either Paul or Phil Rainbow (NHM).

Peter Costigan (Defra, Chair of UK BRAG) offered thanks to Michael Usher (University of Stirling), for his dedication and valued contribution to UK BRAG, following his appointment to the JNCC Committee and subsequent resignation from the Group.

14. Date of the next Meeting

Sallie Bailey (Forestry Commission) offered to host the 9th Meeting of UK BRAG in June 2007 at Silvan House, Edinburgh, and Wednesday 6th June was agreed as a provisional date. Due to a clash of room bookings, this has now been rearranged for Thursday 7th June 2007.