The Value of Local Environmental Records Centres and complexities of data provision, in line with BS 42020 requirements

| Local Records Centres (LRCs) are organisations responsible for the collection, collation and management of biodiversity information. The information they hold plays an essential role in decision-making at all levels. Professional guidance from both the Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) and the recently published British Standard BS42020:2013 *Biodiversity – Code of practice for planning and development* recommend undertaking data searches from LRCs as part of an ecological assessment. | Data ownership

Uncertainties over copyright can deter consultant ecologists from handing over data that has been paid for by a third party (Hunt, 2012). There are, of course, certain circumstances when discretion is required and client confidentiality kept. For the majority of cases, however, this issue can be overcome by use of a contractual clause stating that, unless requested otherwise, all relevant survey data will be shared with LRCs. The Landmark Practice has never been asked by a client not to share data since implementing this clause, and it is standard practice in many consultancies client contracts.

Data searches provide background information on a particular area, often providing useful contextual information to inform a site survey. Good quality data provision from LRCs is dependent however on receipt of up to date, good quality records. Thus, there is an interdependence between LRCs and consultancies that is perhaps underappreciated and promoted. It is in the interest of consultants to provide survey data to LRCs so as to maintain the quality of the data search outputs but this is not always undertaken.

Ecologists who are members of CIEEM are required under their *Code of Professional Conduct* to make data available to the relevant bodies wherever possible. Furthermore, the new BS42020 has added impetus to practicing ecologists to pass on their survey data to LRCs, requiring that “... survey data should be made available to local biological records centres at the time that an ecological report enters the public realm.”

Despite this driver, data collected by ecological consultancies is not being readily shared with LRCs (Tapping, 2010; Kerslake, 2011) unless undertaken as part of a Protected Species Licence requirement. So why is provision of data so uncommon when it is in everybody’s best interest?

Unfortunately there are practical issues that prevent effective sharing of survey data.

| Time and effort

Consultancies typically work ‘on the clock’ and time and effort involved to submit records may be unchargeable. The lack of a standard system for submission of records means that each submission must be tailored to the needs of the individual LRC, and consultants may not have resources needed to extract survey results from reports in the form required by the local LRC. Although most LRCs would be grateful to receive survey data in any format, extraction at their end is also heavily resource dependent. LRCs often rely on volunteers to input data and, if the data is not provided in a compatible format, it will take longer to reach the database, or may be rejected.

There is a clear need for a simple system for quick and easy submission of records. Interested parties are working on developing such a system (Hunt, 2012) which, when introduced, should increase the flow of ecological survey data into the LRCs and consequently improve the quality of data searches. Current information is vital to inform decision making. Without it, consultants, developers, decision and policy makers can be exposed to legal, environmental and economic risk. Notwithstanding such risk and professional obligations, we need a system that enables the sharing of collective environmental knowledge as a benefit to all. |


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