

SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGY AND NATURAL HISTORY

ECOLOGY IN SOMERSET

EDITORIAL

Journals such as this depend on a constant inflow of material to be considered for publication. If this dries up, editors are left scratching around for articles and trying to persuade naturalists that they have something to say which will be of interest to others. This is not an easy task.

By the time this is in print, SANHS will have held its first workshop on 'How to write' and we shall have a better idea of the next stage in giving guidance and information which will encourage more people to put pen to paper. There seems to be a general self-effacing reluctance, even amongst confident and knowledgeable individuals, to produce articles for any type of journal. Often the reason given is lack of time but I cannot believe that this is the complete answer. I know many capable ecologists, who can talk enthusiastically about their subject and who harbour a vast amount of knowledge gained from practical experience but who, when approached, appear to think that what they could impart is 'not much use' or 'it's not scientific enough'. Nature Reserve managers, owners of private nature reserves, keen bird-watchers and other enthusiastic amateurs, are sitting on a fund of information that could be valuable to both national and voluntary bodies that have environmental concerns at the heart of their activities. What one person has learnt through experience is of value to another wanting to carry out a similar project but the only way this knowledge can be disseminated is through the written or spoken word. From my point of view, trying to collect material for publication, the latter is the more useful!

We should also look further afield. SANHS is concerned with the county of Somerset but, in the field of ecology, knowledge gained about a species in Somerset can be applied to the same species nationally. This is especially important when considering the species on the Priority list for action under the Species and Habitats Directive. Action Plans are written for these, outlining the existing knowledge and what needs to be done to enable successful conservation. Conservation of habitats and species involves management which needs to be based on the results of good science; too often this science is lacking and management is a hit and miss affair. The full title of this journal is *Ecology in Somerset, Environmental Science applied to*

Nature Conservation and we seek papers or short articles which highlight the conservation value of work done by ecologists in the field.

So what can you do as individuals? Our greatest need is knowledge of the ecology of common species, their life cycle, their habitat requirements, how they fit into the food webs, for, without this information, how can we possibly even start to consider their conservation? You would be surprised at how little we know about common species, especially the rather overlooked small invertebrates. Why 'common'? Because once the common species start disappearing, we know we have a real environmental crisis on our hands. Look at the House Sparrow in London. Rare species tend to become extinct eventually whatever measures we take but serious changes in our environment will hit all species and it is far easier to monitor plants and animals that occur plentifully throughout the county and observe trends in populations that could easily be missed in difficult-to-find rarities.

What I would love to see is all naturalists in Somerset taking on a common species, perhaps present in their own gardens, and studying its ecology in the way I have indicated above. If you are interested, there are a number of specialist groups in Somerset willing to give talks, run workshops and give advice on both species and habitats. Over the next months, we shall be establishing a database of the names of individuals and groups willing to help with community projects. Are you willing to be included or would you like to be on the receiving end? For example, each year the Somerset Invertebrates Group runs identification workshops on individual taxa, they are open to all, free, and you can come as a total beginner and go away feeling a good deal more confident! The Natural History Committee of SANHS can give you advice and help on where to go for assistance. Why not start this summer? Our wildlife could benefit from your decision.

PAT HILL-COTTINGHAM