

## ECOLOGY IN SOMERSET

### EDITORIAL

#### **The role of expert amateurs in conservation**

Does SANHS and especially the members with Natural History interests have, or should have, a more active role in contributing to the new machinery of conservation? Not only are we hoping to put forward our policy with regard to wind-turbines, in particular the siting of them, but the whole idea of conservation of the wider landscape is under debate at present. Within Somerset there are many contributing groups of active volunteers. Somerset Wildlife Trust itself, Natural History societies and Specialist Groups all support and contribute environmental consultants to protect wildlife in a society with increasing demands on finite resources.

Does our Society do enough in supporting and lobbying for our beautiful and unique landscape and wildlife, in particular, what is it contributing to the Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) set up in all the Districts and which rely on grass-roots action for their implementation? Targeted species for conservation in the BAPs are Priority Species and these species are all rare. In my opinion, this limitation to rarity is mistaken. Many areas, important for wildlife, have no rare species as such, instead the association of species found are typical of that area and contribute to its attraction, both from a species diversity point of view but, equally important, as an amenity for enjoyment. After all, if the common species start disappearing, we should really be worried! Perhaps SANHS has a role; therefore, in promoting non-BAP species that are being held up as important by large numbers of amateurs, as well as those that are on the national BAP list. By adopting such plants and animals, typical of our Somerset landscape, and which are still reasonably common, we can involve local community groups into developing interest and knowledge which will have a knock-on effect in benefitting the rare species as well.

I am all in favour of a 'bottom-up' approach, in which impetus for action comes from the grass roots. Getting local residents involved with their environment is essential for its maintenance – and someone has to do the basic work investigating the life cycles and ecological requirements, for which we have an embarrassing paucity of knowledge, even for the commonest of species. We have only to see the success of nationwide surveys such as the RSPB's garden birds surveys, to realise the vast fund of observations and knowledge to be exploited amongst

ordinary people who care for their environment. It is keen amateur observers who have highlighted various concerns recently – the demise of House Sparrow populations in towns and the significance of phenology, indicating changing weather patterns, are two examples that spring to mind.

Might not SANHS champion the construction, manning and assessment process bottom-up? It really worries me that the army of expert amateur ecologists has not been asked to make a contribution to the design of the process by which BAPs are to be taken into the ‘greater landscape’ strategies, and that, with the sole exception of Sedgemoor Action Group for our Environment (SAGE), it has not been involved in any strategy by which District BAP species are chosen. For some species there is already an army of activists (about 100 for Black Poplar), and it is surely sensible for the BAP process to take note of the potential. After all, the main worry of most Local Authorities is that they can’t (because of the heavy-handed, top-down approach, of course) get things going on the ground. People do not like to be told by LAs what to do! SANHS, and other conservation groups, should have no difficulty in stimulating things at grass roots by fostering activities through the Groups as well as in print.

We need to ask ourselves a fundamental question. Does SANHS have an active role in promoting wildlife conservation, or solely in promoting the dissemination of information about wildlife and conservation practice as at present? So far, the *Ecology in Somerset* (EIS) section in *Proceedings* has contained articles that support conservation by disseminating survey results, appraisals of management practices and essays of argument about principles. This is all quite impartial. Ought it also to champion particular species and techniques?

Three possibilities are: i) SANHS to take an active role in providing a forum for amateur Specialist Groups to contribute information to BAPS about the known habitat preferences and behaviour of Somerset species, ii) SANHS to become a partner with other county organizations in the ‘BARS’ process of assessing the BAPS which is under way at county level, iii) SANHS to establish and/or support particular projects at local ‘grass-roots’ level. In each case there could be a role for EIS in keeping everybody informed of new and intended local initiatives, opportunities, and contacts, as well as providing ecological information and progress reports.

Your views are needed! By the time this reaches you, the Wetlands Symposium will have come and gone. We hope to bring you news of that in the next issue. It may well have some relevance to what is discussed here.

If you have views about any of the ideas expressed in this Editorial, please make them known to the Chairman of SANHS’ Natural History Committee, who can be contacted through the SANHS office.

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