
ECOLOGY IN SOMERSET

EDITORIAL

The Somerset Biodiversity Management Group (SBMG) of Somerset County Council is carrying out a review of the Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) and is working on the identification of new priorities for the revised plans. These LBAPs were produced during the 1990s, under the national Agenda 21 initiative, to highlight habitats and species for conservation, involving not just recognised conservation bodies such as English Nature but also local communities. However, little was done in most districts to implement the plans and it was realised that a more pragmatic approach was necessary.

The big problem with any such government initiative is making the connection between the official bodies, such as English Nature and District Councils, and the specialists at grass roots who are the people with the knowledge and experience to advise and implement any action plans alongside local communities. It was realised by the SBMG that a top-down approach was not going to work and, with negotiations and discussion between representatives of SBMG and SANHS, a Species Working Group (SWG) is being set up to provide a network of naturalists and specialists. This group will advise on a selection of priority species for which Species Action Plans (SAPs) can be written for the most important with shorter Species Statements for the others. In addition, a 'champion' will be identified for each taxon to lead the review process and consult with other specialists in their field; to this end, draft selection criteria have been produced by the SBMG and will be considered and modified in an iterative process.

Selection of species is not easy. Certainly rare and endangered species need consideration, especially those included in the National Priority list, but it is

inevitable that such species depend on more common species for food and habitat requirements and often these are also 'at risk'. Add the uncertain effects of climate change and chaos and one has the high possibility of producing a very long list!

Risk of loss can be assessed under two main headings: a) environmental impact and b) intrinsic properties of population dynamics, and these two approaches are considered in the articles on Orthoptera and Mollusca in this volume. However, to achieve successful management for BAP species, both approaches are needed and there is a dearth of scientific research that the SWG and SBMG can call upon to determine any accurate 'risk of loss' of BAP species.

After an initial meeting in April 2006 of an ad hoc group of people representing the major taxa, the following aims for the Working Group were produced:

- To select a long list of priority species
- To make recommendations to the SBMG of which should be taken forward as SAPs and Species Statements
- To ensure that recommendations for Action Plans are sound and well evidenced so that we can be sure that they will actually make a difference.

To which I would add a further: 'To encourage research into the habitat requirements and population dynamics of 'at risk' species.'

The review process also looks at habitats, this is being done by SBMG and the Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC). It is to be hoped that the inseparability of species and habitats will be given adequate attention in the revised BAPs.

If any SANHS members would like to be included in the Species Working Group network, please get in touch with me on 01458 210557.

PAT HILL-COTTINGHAM

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Linda Carter worked as an advisor on Wider Countryside projects for Berkshire Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, before returning to live and work in Somerset, where she continues her lifelong interest in flora.

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