

Yorkshire and Humber Meeting (YHNSWG)

This was a special meeting to consider firstly the opinions of natural scientists within the region about the concept of a national natural sciences network, and secondly, what the options were for a broader network within the region than already existed. The meeting was set up by the YHNSWG, the regional natural sciences curators' forum, with a view to canvassing the views of as broad a range of natural scientists as possible. To this end, invitations were issued to many of the groups and organisations that might have been expected to be interested. These included English Nature, the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire Wildlife Trusts, the North Lincolnshire Council Environment Team, the Lincolnshire and Yorkshire Naturalists Unions, the Humber biodiversity project and a number of special interest groups. Interest was expressed by many of the groups and about half a dozen groups were represented at the meeting.

A fairly short discussion established that there was little interest in the idea of a national network, at least beyond what already existed, and where work was already being done. Particular concerns were over how relevant the interests and activities of such a network would be to the regions, and whether a national network could be established fast enough to keep people interested.

With regards to the local scene, there was more interest, and two facts became immediately apparent. The first was that there was already an established biodiversity network for the region in existence, and that most of the key partners were already involved in this. This clearly indicated that such networking activities were felt to be valuable. The second fact was that museums were not a part of this network. It seems that museums still do not have a high profile as a partner. However, given the fact that museums are the principal holders of natural history collections, that they have a public interface and a combined audience across the region of millions of people (or at least visits), it was recognised that they should also be more involved with the network of people who are also working in natural history.

The issue then shifted to how this could best be brought about. It was agreed that it should begin with a project or projects that would draw on the strengths of all parties, be beneficial to all concerned, and be achievable in a timescale that would maintain interest. It was felt that one or more small pilot projects should be initiated to see how effectively this could be done, and two ideas were eventually adopted. The first was the idea of a skills audit, an idea that has been tried in the past but with limited success. Nevertheless, because it would be very useful for anybody to be able to access some kind of directory or database of who could do what in natural sciences in the region, it was worth revisiting.

The second idea centred on the fact that although museum collections contained a vast amount of material, it was frequently not easy to access that material in a way that was useful to researchers. For example, a researcher interested in a particular species or group of animals or plants could not readily find out what material was held in which museums. For this collections data to be pulled together could be of great benefit to the whole community. It was felt that a good pilot project would be to select a small number of species and see how effectively the data about these species could be brought together from the various collections around the region. To this end, a species list has been put together, and circulated around the regions museums, and the information will be passed to the Humber Environmental data Centre, who are able to database it and make it available online. If this proves to be successful, it could be extended in two ways, firstly to cover a broader range of species, and secondly, to extend it outside of the region, for instance to draw information about holdings provenanced from within the region but held in museums outside of the region.

It is not clear how similar the situation in the Yorkshire and Humber region is to other regions, where both the museum and non-museum networks may be better or less well developed. Nevertheless, any success in this region could well provide guidelines for other regions, and if there is to be a national network, it may well be that it will be better evolved gradually through this kind of process rather than established from the outset.