Databases, Naturalists and the Global Biodiversity Convention

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Since the 1992 Global Convention on Biodiversity (GCB), the construction of new databases and information technologies has been seen to be a matter of urgency in the biodiversity policy domain. Global biodiversity is held to be in crisis and understanding the extent of its loss and the biodiversity that remains is thought to be highly important for national and global policymaking. However, there are substantial *challenges* to be faced when designing databases and related software packages to document the world's biodiversity. One especially difficult problem is how to make strong connections between centralised, standardised information on the one hand and the information needs of local people and places on the other.

This one-year project focuses specifically upon this problem by examining two different software packages used for the collection of biological records. Both systems contribute to biodiversity databases in the UK. First, *Recorder*, which has been developed within the National Biodiversity Network (NBN), a partnership of organizations concerned with the collection, management, exchange and use of wildlife information in the UK. And second, *Mapmate*, which has been developed by a private organisation and its design has been driven largely by the user needs of field naturalists in the UK.

What the project aims to achieve

The research project aims to reach an understanding of biodiversity software technologies and their users by looking at:

- How and with what technologies, different recorders document their knowledge of the natural world.
- How certain recorders choose to use one or other or both recording packages.
- Who, and to what ends, different users communities access data provided by both Mapmate and the NBN.
- What was taken into account about both data contributing and user communities, by the designers of the distinct software packages.

Through the understandings generated, the research aims to provide an opportunity for reflection for data contributors, users and technology designers about the advantages and disadvantages of each system and to explore possible ways in which they might mutually or individually work towards the protection of local and global biodiversity, whilst remaining "in touch" with local users and contributors.

Methods

Interviewing is the key method in this Social Science Research Project. Interviews will be sought with individuals from three groups: (1) those individuals who collect and contribute data for the NBN using Recorder (2) those individuals and institutions that collect and contribute data using Mapmate and (3) those institutions responsible for designing the NBN, Recorder and Mapmate.
Interviews will be followed by discussion groups with selected individuals from the three groups in order to generate common ideas and understanding of the key issues arising from interviews.

Expected **outputs** are: (1) a *report* that will show our findings and reflections on how user needs and practices could influence the centralisation of UK biodiversity data; (2) *end-of-project workshop* for institutional and non-institutional players that have been involved in the research and (3) As the research progresses, we aim to present our work at conferences, through articles and via a website.

Research Team

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