

Minutes

6th Meeting of The UK Biodiversity Research Advisory Group Thursday 8th December 2005 Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Present: Peter Costigan (Chair), Richard Ferris (Secretariat), John Baxter, Richard Brand-Hardy, Michael Usher, Andrew Pullin, Andrew Stott, Tim Blackstock, Kevin Watts, Paul Rose, Mike Fay, Pamela Kempton, Mary Gibby, Paul Leonard, Davy McCracken, Havard Prosser, Jane Sears, Allan Watt, Mark Spencer.

1. Apologies: Ian Bainbridge, Kevin Charman, David Macdonald, Sallie Bailey, Michel Kaiser, Peter Robertson, Scot Mathieson, Sarah Webster, Mark Wright, Kerry Turner, Martin Sharman.

2. Minutes of the last meeting

These were approved as a true record of the 5th BRAG meeting, 23 June 2005.

3. Matters arising

The majority of these had been dealt with, with the following still to be addressed in full:

ACTION 3.1 (previous ACTION 3.1): the membership of a working group to consider BRAG engagement with European issues was agreed (Andy Stott, Allan Watt, and Richard Ferris). The group is yet to meet, but through Defra's work on BiodivERsA and continued engagement with EPBRS, BRAG is keeping reasonably well aligned.

ACTION 3.2 (previous ACTION 3.2): the Secretariat began work on drafting a paper on the effectiveness of current policies in delivering biodiversity. However, this has been put on hold due to other commitments. Andy Stott and Richard Ferris have discussed this, but not made any plan of action. BRAG needs to consider how this theme is addressed, although it was felt that existing BRAG research strategies (in particular, that concerned with socio-economic issues) have gone some way towards addressing important policy-related issues.

ACTION 3.3 (previous ACTION 6.1): A review of climate change research needs has been carried out by JNCC, and supplemented by a report from the BES workshop held on 28/29 June. However, the emphasis of the work required has now shifted from identification of research needs to setting of priorities for action. Andy Stott has let a contract with CEH Banchory to undertake a review on behalf of the England Biodiversity Strategy climate change group. Andy Stott would like to organise a small workshop (a joint CEH-BRAG event) for policymakers in February/March 2006. This will be revisited under agenda item 6, *Climate Change Research Priorities*.

ACTION 3.4 (previous ACTION 8.2): a summary of the completed research strategies was prepared by the Secretariat and presented to ERFF's Research Coordination Working Group. It was noted that the outcome was unsatisfactory, in that ERFF did not require an analysis of research needs. BRAG needs to consider how best to engage with ERFF, tailoring outputs to suit stakeholder requirements.

It was considered that BRAG and ERFF need more of a two-way exchange of information. BRAG needs to be clear with ERFF about what the group's objectives are and, therefore, what we can offer them. It was suggested that BRAG might target individual ERFF members with research messages (at a specific level, appropriate to them), with only higher-level themes being aimed at ERFF.

This will be revisited under agenda item 9, *BRAG Review & Evaluation*.

4. Feedback from the UK Biodiversity Standing Committee (UKBSC)

Peter Costigan and Andy Stott gave a verbal report outlining the meeting. The BRAG Review was flagged up, and the UKBSC was asked to nominate two members to join a Review Group. The UKBSC was happy with the update from BRAG, and the progress that the Group is making.

5. Feedback from EPBRS and EU Nature Directors' Meeting

A review paper, drafted by CEH and based on the e-conference prior to the EPBRS meeting in Aviemore, 2-5 October, is now at the peer-review stage. The EPBRS recommendations (presented as BRAG paper 6/1) were presented to the Nature Directors' Meeting, and were well received. The issues identified have also been fed into SBSTTA¹, and research recommendations will go forward to the next CBD Conference of the Parties, March 2006.

In the discussion which followed, some concern was voiced as to how the research identified actually gets taken forward. The need for cross-sectoral research was emphasised, and it was recognised that key policy questions needed to be subjected to a systematic review of the evidence base.

6. Climate Change Research Priorities

Andy Stott informed the Group of a CEH-led review of climate change research priorities in support of the England Biodiversity Strategy (EBS). This includes a literature review of the impacts of climate change adaptation measures in England, examines the options for adaptation, and identifies knowledge gaps and research priorities.

Recognising that a lot of work has taken place to identify knowledge gaps, the current need is for a prioritisation exercise to decide which research is actually to be commissioned. CEH is to hold a workshop for research funders and users in order to carry out this prioritisation, with a focus beyond England, to consider climate change at the UK level. It was noted that the Scottish Executive and National Assembly for Wales would wish to be involved.

¹ Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) of the Convention on Biological Diversity. 11th Meeting, Montreal, 28 November – 2 December.

A provisional date of Thursday 9th March 2006 has been set, at a location in London (details to be confirmed).

ACTION 6.1: BRAG members to notify Andy Stott if they wish to attend.

7. Sub-Group Reports

A report of the activities of the *Biodiversity and Ecosystem Function* sub-group was presented (Paper 6/2). This sub-group has met once, at the University of York on 28 November 2005. A further two meetings are anticipated. The terms of reference and draft position statement have been agreed, and a number of headline topics identified. The sub-group is chaired by Allan Watt.

Paper 6/3 outlined progress on the *Conservation of genetic and native species diversity* theme, reporting on the UKPopNet-funded workshop held at Losehill Hall on 19-21 October 2005. This workshop addressed genetic conservation, bringing together researchers, conservation managers, and policymakers. The proceedings are to be published as a JNCC Report before 31 March 2006, and this will form the basis of a BRAG research strategy. The need for a sub-group to take this forward will be considered.

ACTION 7.1: Secretariat to invite nominations to join a sub-group to identify research needs associated with native species conservation, and consider genetic conservation issues raised in the workshop.

8. BiodivERsA: an ERA-Net for biodiversity research in Europe

Paper 6/4 gave an update on progress with this project, in which the UK is represented by Defra (Richard Ferris, on temporary secondment) and NERC (Gerry Lawson). Richard Ferris notified the meeting of a two-day workshop on best practice and overcoming barriers to collaboration in biodiversity research, to be held in Peterborough on 22/23 February 2006. Attendance would be by invitation only.

9. BRAG Evaluation and Review

Paper 6/5 was presented to the meeting to help structure the discussion. It was suggested that BRAG exists to do three things: advise, coordinate and communicate. To this end, the Group should consider being much more proactive, “pushing” ideas to the research funding community. This was discussed in the BRWG², and it was felt that the approach should be proactive, but gentle and tactful.

A key action should be to undertake a customer needs analysis, since modes of influence will differ between funders. Furthermore, it is necessary to tailor the priorities, identifying which are best suited for particular funders. In order to do this most effectively, BRAG needs to identify timeframes and opportunities, i.e. when do funding bodies make decisions about future research priorities? For example, when do the Research Councils UK (RCUK) plan their thematic programmes? (as BRAG needs to take advantage of this). It was also recognised that BRAG should approach funders in an informed manner, if the Group is to have credibility.

² The Biodiversity Research Working Group, predecessor to UK BRAG.

In addition to this “top-down” approach, there are merits in adopting a “bottom-up” approach. This would involve circulating BRAG’s research strategies to researchers, to encourage them to pick up the research priorities and use them when submitting funding applications, in order to offer justification and support for their proposals.

ACTION 9.1: BRAG Review Group to consider how best to reach the research community in a directed way, and include this as an important component of the Review Report.

Concern was voiced that users might not be sufficiently aware of BRAG’s research priorities, and that there is no mechanism for monitoring how well these are taken up. In order to facilitate communication of BRAG’s research priorities, the Group should consider using the appropriate scientific societies, e.g. the British Ecological Society.

ACTION 9.2: Secretariat to discuss this with Andrew Pullin.

There is also a need for BRAG to connect with the wider research and practitioner community, such as the Wildlife Trusts and others in the voluntary sector. To achieve this, BRAG should consider increasing their representation.

Underlying all of this is the need to translate BRAG recommendations into targeted research projects with a greater focus. Richard Brand-Hardy made reference to a mechanism used within Defra for doing this. However, it was noted that each customer needs a different level of detail, reflecting the degree to which they are interested in a particular topic. It was suggested that all funders should establish some form of mechanism for refining and focusing proposals.

ACTION 9.3: The Secretariat should speak to Pamela Kempton (NERC), regarding ways of shaping proposals to suit NERC’s requirements (and those of the other relevant Research Councils?)

An important issue for BRAG to consider to what extent it exists to coordinate or advise on biodiversity research. Coordination requires that the Secretariat is kept fully informed, and it is hard to see this happening when members have so many existing commitments. However, BRAG does need to find some way of tracking what has been done as a consequence (direct or indirect) of its recommendations.

However, the facilitation role of BRAG must not be overlooked. This need not cost a lot of money, but it might well be worthwhile BRAG offering “something of a helping hand” in order to get research started.

The crucial question is: if BRAG did not exist, what wouldn’t happen? It is likely that funders would probably set up *ad hoc* pieces of work, and overlap would occur.

Areas for action that could help improve BRAG’s effectiveness, include:

- Obtaining greater input from “the ground”, i.e. practitioners. BRAG members need to tap into the wider community, when identifying research needs;

- Giving the right advice is crucially important. BRAG needs to set out ideas in sufficient detail that they are picked up and used by funders and researchers;
- Involving scientists in setting policies. In order to improve communication between scientists and policymakers, the former need to take more of a lead in shaping policy responses.

10. Systematics Research

A short paper was presented, outlining the main points made in the Select Committee on Science and Technology, Third Report, issued in May 2002: *What on Earth? The Threat to the Science underpinning conservation* (paper 6/6).

It is important to recognise that some progress has been made regarding the points raised in the paper, as borne out by recent decisions to increase financial support for students studying taxonomy at postgraduate levels. Furthermore, the Institute of Biology has been very supportive of the need for systematics research. At the same time, it is noted that there has been a decline in systematics teaching in Universities. BRAG should consider whether there would be any merit in coming together with other forums, e.g. GTI³ and GBIF⁴, in order to take this forward.

ACTION 10.1: The Secretariat to discuss this with the GTI National Focal Point and with the National Biodiversity Network (as the node for GBIF in the UK).

11. A.O.B.

Final report for BRAG

BRAG needs to produce a Final Report, presented to and endorsed by the UKBSC⁵. Given the current workload faced by the Secretariat, it was agreed that this should be delivered to the second UKBSC meeting in October 2006. A draft report should be prepared for the June meeting of BRAG (see below). To achieve this, a small drafting team is needed; this should comprise sub-group Chairs and the Secretariat.

ACTION 11.1: The Secretariat to notify sub-group Chairs and agree a workplan / timetable for delivery, for consideration by BRAG members.

BRAG response to the CEH review

Following the announcement concerning the future of CEH, there was strong support for a statement from BRAG. This needs to seek assurances from NERC that future biodiversity research capacity will not be undermined by the proposed cuts.

ACTION 11.2: The Secretariat will seek and collate views of BRAG members, using these to draft a statement. The approval of BRAG members would be sought, with the agreed statement being submitted before the 13 January 2006 deadline.

Defra Evidence and Innovation Strategy 2005-08

BRAG members were asked to provide individual comments on the consultation document, the deadline date having been set at 12 January 2006.

³ The Global Taxonomy Initiative <http://www.biodiv.org/programmes/cross-cutting/taxonomy/>

⁴ The Global Biodiversity Information Facility <http://www.gbif.org/>

⁵ The UK Biodiversity Standing Committee

ACTION 11.3: Peter Costigan to contact all BRAG members with the weblink to the consultation document and, where requested, to send a hard copy.

12. Date of the Next Meeting

This was set for Thursday 8th June, to be held in Cardiff or Bangor. The precise location is to be confirmed.