Developing skills and capacity in the volunteering community

Executive summary

Introduction

The Defra fund for biodiversity recording in the voluntary sector was part of a government commitment over three years to a series of schemes. This is one of those projects managed by the Field Studies Council.

Findings

- There is a lack of biological recording data – especially for some of the non-charismatic and difficult to identify taxa. Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act Section 41 (S41) requires the Secretary of State to publish a list of habitats and species which are of principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity in England. There is a deficiency of data on many of these species and habitats.

- There is recognition that volunteers play an important role in contributing to biological recording databases. It is also recognised that training and support will be needed to encourage volunteer data submission for difficult taxa.

- Part of the DEFRA fund for Biological Recording was used to grow the volunteer community and offer training and support to encourage more submission of biological records through the Biodiversity Fellowship Project (bio. fell) as run through the Field Studies Council (FSC).

- The project engaged with the recording communities through a steering group and additional links with national schemes and as well as building on the networks of the project delivery organisation – the FSC.

- bio. fells provided subsidised or free training opportunities and ongoing support for over 300 volunteers and resulted in over 6,000 records being submitted – mostly through iRecord

- The training courses and ongoing support were very well received and many volunteers could see the benefits of training and were prepared to submit an increased number of records.

- A range of volunteer expertise was recognised – some were starting their careers and some were already submitting valid records – although not necessarily in difficult taxa.

- FSC were able to make this project work only through pre-existing contacts and being able to migrate some of the post-course support to a second externally funded project. This project could not have been offered form a 'standing start'

- The project was not fully cost covering in terms of administrative and support time. The shortfall of just under £7K was underwritten by the FSC.

- The overall cost of just over £100 per place was felt to be good value for money.

- The few issues with quality of resources might be best addressed through developing a tutor network and providing 'training the trainers' support

- iRecord was recognised as a very useful tool. More needs to be done to establish the role of the county recorder. It was felt by many that the mentoring and support offered by a good country recorder was very valuable.

- There needs to be an increase in funding for training – particularly for the trainers to incentivise and reward those already committed to taxonomic identification and recording to enable them to transfer skills to those learning and developing.

Recommendations

- Future training programmes should be considered and the potential for more synergies developed across user groups and volunteer communities.

- A longer timeframe to support and ensure progressive training and networking should be considered at least 3 years and preferably 5 years.

- The development of pre- and post course resources is to be encouraged as part of any course provision – and the issue of copyright addressed.

- The programme would benefit from targeting a smaller range of taxa in any one year and ensuring progression from beginner to advanced

- Ongoing support should be built into future projects including e. Resources, access to microscopes/collecting/identification equipment and verification pathways.

- Any future projects should not be limited to volunteers but seek partnerships and working relationships with agencies and consultancy staff