Digital Tools and Training to support Recording schemes and Societies (RSS)

Summary from workshop at the BRC Conference, Wallingford 23/03/2019

Lead by Rich Burkmar and Tom August

We invited attendees at the BRC conference to discuss the opportunities and barriers that exist around digital tools and training to support recording schemes and societies. We focussed this discussion in four areas; data collection, data management, data visualisation, and data analysis. From the flip-charts and post-it notes used to collect information on the day, we have tried to distil the discussions into the 'top three' themes.

1. RSS organisers want to do more with their data

RSS organisers and key players want to put their scheme's existing data to greater use.

Species trends - Production of robust population and occupancy trends from RSS data is seen as an area where RSS data can have great impact. The current model for most RSS is that they make their data available to other parties who carry out the analysis and presentation of this information. By bringing RSS closer to this process and increasing understanding of it across RSS members and organisers, the whole cycle from data collection to trend generation could become more integrated and efficient (see also 'quantifying effort' below).

Intelligence-led recording - RSS want to create dynamic maps that show where recorder effort can be directed, both in time and place, to achieve maximum benefit. For example, maps could use models of species distributions to direct recording effort to areas where species are hypothesised to be present, but no records exist.

Quantifying effort - There is a wide appreciation amongst RSS that there are many possible ways of quantifying effort, e.g. recording 'complete lists', noting time spent recording, recording distance covered etc., and that these measures are context sensitive. No one has all the answers for this yet, but its importance is acknowledge and there is a will to move forward with it.

2. RSS want to use their current data to support recorders

It is widely recognised that we are not getting best value from our existing data when it comes to supporting recorders who are out making new records.

Shorter feedback cycle

Very few things motivate biological recorders as much as knowing that their records are valued. Providing feedback as records are submitted is one way of showing that they are valued and used. The faster, more context sensitive and 'intelligent' we can make this feedback, the more motivating it is for recorders. Proactive advice that is time and location sensitive could help direct recorders to make the most of their time even before records are submitted, e.g. a 'what's near me' button on recording apps.

Better interactive maps

The issue of mapping, to provide information for RSS organisers and members was discussed widely at the workshop. Suggestions centred on responsive and easy to use mapping tools that provide recorders with the things they like to see, e.g. atlas maps at different resolutions, based on the data held by RSS.

3. RSS would appreciate wider access to training

Attendees suggested that more access to support and training would help them achieve the things laid out in points one and two above.

Better use of existing tools

Although more and better tools can always be useful, it was a widely held view that there are already good numbers of existing tools out there, e.g. Sparta, QGIS, apps and websites, from which RSS aren't getting maximum benefit, sometimes due to a lack of confidence with them.

There was a clamour for more training and training resources to facilitate RSS getting the most from existing tools. It's worth noting too that sometimes the view was expressed that there are *too many* tools out there (especially recording applications) and we would be better served getting the most out of what we already have than creating new ones.

Resources for creating visualisations & using tools

It was recognised that access to resources, outside of the context of formal training, was also important. One idea put forward, for example, was for 'recipe books' for visualisation and analysis techniques. Another was for a library of useful Excel macros – probably the most widely used tool amongst RSS and biological recorders in general.