

British Ecological Society Mires Research Group (MRG) Report 2001

MRG achievements over the last three years

In the past the group has sponsored some good conferences and has held some good research field trips bringing together a range of expertise into field situations. The group has acted as a focus for primarily UK-based mire science and has also facilitated useful contact between managers and scientists. It has given the opportunities for old and young to meet informally and exchange ideas. The MRG has a great breadth of expertise and interest among its members; understanding of wetlands can only advance effectively using a multi-proxy approach, and the MRG is a useful forum for that approach. However, the group has been rather moribund recently. Over the last three years, it organised a one day workshop: Wetlands, Trees and the Ecomanager (11 Nov. 1998); two week end field meetings: Cumbrian Basin Mires (22-23 May 1999) and Mid-Wales Cors Fochno (Borth) and Cors Caron (Tregaron) (10-11 July 1999); a Summer field meeting: New Forest valley mires (6-10 September 1999). A mini-conference entitled 'The role of known emissions to the atmosphere in determining the conservation management options for precipitation -fed wetlands' which was due to be held on the 17-19 April 2000 was cancelled due to lack of interest. (Uplands 1999: Problems, pressures and solutions?). All members wish to raise the profile of mires *via* the BES however, we are down to a half session at the BES Winter meetings.

The MNR (Mires Research Newsletter) was greatly appreciated by the MRG members however there were insufficient people contributing to its content and was abandoned on issue 20 (Dec 2000). An email discussion group was set up at about the same time as the demise of the MRN but so far it has not worked as well as hoped. If the membership were greater perhaps there would be more email discussion.

Recently, the MRG has become rather dominated by conservation/management interests with virtually no focus on science. Its role is rather fragile at present. There seems to be apathy, perhaps due to members having no clear "vision" of why the MRG exists and what is possible within it. Although people still see it as a forum for sharing information and seeking advice, publishing information and focussing attention on mire conservation. Site managers see the strengths of the MRG as being a blend of science and field expertise. With a constant turnover of people in both the science and practical areas there is a crying need to keep bringing peatland people together. To maintain and update the science base that site

managers work from as well as to bring scientists into contact with practitioners and to keep them focussed on real restoration problems. Some practitioners find it too academic.

The conservation part of the MRG is important and should remain. However, we need more focus on scientific work. This needs to be done through science-based workshops/meetings/field trips and the email list. In relation to this, the three year period ends on a very positive note with the 'Changing Wetlands' conference in Sheffield (10-13 Sept 2001) which has turned out to be the largest Wetland Ecological meeting ever to be held in the UK. It is hoped that this is the beginning of a relaunch of the MRG.

Over the next three years we plan to:

1. Broaden the remit of the MRG
2. Attract more young members (PhD students) by having a....
3. Make the listserv &/or a newsletter become more stimulating of debate
4. Offer a thematic session for the BES meeting 2002.
5. Make a European Wetland conference a regular event
6. Organise field meetings
7. Other suggestions

1. Broaden the remit of the MRG

For historical reasons, mires research in the UK today is dominated by people who work on palaeoenvironmental reconstruction (i.e., palaeo-“ecologists”). In practise, most of these researchers do not attend BES meetings (Quaternary people have a separate conference at about the same time), and are involved in other groups (e.g., PALPEAT in the Quaternary Research Association). Certainly, it would be good if we could attract these people to the MRG as well, but in itself this will still not be sufficient. We are considering changing the name to the “Wetlands Ecology Group” and try to attract people who work on other types of freshwater wetlands (e.g., riparian zones, shallow lakes) or even coastal wetlands (e.g., saltmarshes). We also need to attract molecular ecologists, microbial ecologists, peat biochemist.

2. Attract more younger members (PhD students)?

I would like us to aid and then encourage post-grads within the mires research field to organise to meet up once a year and swap news/grievances/experiences (a post-grad meeting which may also include Post docs but not supervisors).

Generally they will be attracted by the MRG having more science-based activities. Recently the MRG got to a point where field trips and meetings (e.g. “Trees and the Eco-Manager”) were little more than an opportunity for managers to “pump” scientists for advice on how to manage their sites. The exchange needs to be two-way. Perhaps field meetings could visit their research sites. Organise conferences that are relevant to them such as the changing wetland conference

Of course, PhD students first need to know that the MRG exists so good advertising is essential on whatever is the most suitable media. A good web page? (see 3.). We need to get the supervisors engaged and for them to convey to their students that if they want to know who is who in bogs then the MRG is the place.

3. Make the listserv &/or a newsletter become more stimulating of debate

There is a need to improve information about the existence and role of the MRG as well communication within the MRG. We will be making much greater use of the internet with a MRG homepage (and we have still to decide whether a paper version is also produced). Getting articles for the newsletter (MRN) became a real problem, but we are hoping that having more clearly defined types of submission, rather than just ‘everyone write something sometime’, will make people more willing to contribute. There needs to be clear ‘types’ of article which are commonly used.

A few suggestions for things that might go in a newsletter include:

- (1) Annotated bibliographies of recent papers/books, or just a quick note sent to a newsletter editor of ‘here’s a cool paper I read
- (2) Short articles on ‘key’ papers in particular fields whether recent or old, explaining why they were so important, how the ideas have changed wetland science/stimulated later work, which of the questions raised have been addressed
- (3) Short descriptions of ‘work in progress’, or of sites where an interesting problem is raised and someone wants to get some work going, so that people can find out what others are up to; this could help networking, encourage exchanges of ideas, lead to questions about methods/approaches etc., and possibly even lead to new collaboration relationships...
- (4) ‘Debates’; people with different views on particular issues. Each write a short piece, putting them together could be really interesting especially for those who don’t work directly on the topics.
- (5) Reports on recent meetings both MRG organised, BES organised or run by other organisations, news of upcoming meetings
- (6) News about individuals activities

- (7) List of new PhD students starting mires based topics
- (8) Short biographies/interests of new members.
- (9) Make objectives available and up to date

4. Thematic session for the BES Winter meeting in 2002.

The MRG needs to be more proactive in organising conference sessions at BES Winter Meeting (although I sent an e-mail to all members for the 2002 meeting and I gather the response was still poor). The MRG is very keen to keep mire neoecology/palaeoecology visible and active within the BES. The theme should not be too narrow - we need to maximise participation. The topic should at least bring together different sections of the group or be geared to attract speakers outside the present MRG remit (a "relaunch").

Two possibilities:

(1) Scientific management of wetlands: current understanding and future prospects. This could be split this into a number of themes based on types of wetland (fen/bog) and processes (hydrology, plant/animal communities, decomposition). We could go for someone like Mike Waddington at McMaster, Canada or perhaps better still one of the Dutch scientists involved in conservation management. This would attract practitioners and researchers.

Two other themes which were suggested were (a) Wetland restoration. A Scandinavian speaker on restoration of mires drained for forestry e.g. Hanna Heikilla or Harri Vasander (b) Scientific aspects of GAPP, Wise Use issues and peatland biodiversity. Both are possibly too specific and could be included in (1).

(2) Applying the long-term perspective to contemporary problems - using the unique potential of the wetland archive (or of course longer-term monitoring sites) to provide a longer term view of the origins / consequences / severity / treatment of contemporary issues in wetlands. This would include ecologists as well as palaeontologists. Possible guest speakers: Prof. John Birks from Bergen, Prof. Barry Warner from Waterloo, Ontario.

5. European Wetland conference

The MRG needs to be more proactive in organising conference sessions independently (e.g. the Sheffield one in September) together with the SWS or IMCG. The 'Changing Wetland' conference jointly with the MRG and SWS in September was a great opportunity and we would like make a European Wetland conference a regular event every 2-4 years to bring

together the wetland community. The MRG could clearly play a role, though we would need to get some continental groups (or at least a set of people) involved.

6. Organise field meetings

Members appear to find it more and more difficult to find the time for field trips. The aim is to not be too ambitious in terms of numbers of outings but select meetings which will attract the most people.

Suggestions made by members:

- Fens in Broadland (with a hydrological focus). The visit will include demonstrations of hydrological field measurements, evaluation tools and a critical discussion of the available methods.
- Solway Mosses (will include discussions with an archaeologist and a demo of peat depthing by ground radar)
- Field visit focussing on the latest developments regarding SACs and favourable conservation status; condition assessment. A number of sites within the protected areas network would be visited e.g. local sites to Greater Manchester include Red Moss, Astley and Bedford Mosses, Wigan Flashes (Bryn Marsh and Ince Moss), Holcroft Moss and Risley Moss.

There have been some suggestions for summer meetings but nothing specific yet: France, Northern Ireland, Scotland (Mhoine Mhor near Lochgilphead and Claish Moss in Argyll), Hebridean islands. However, again people are finding it difficult to commit the time.

7. Other suggestions:

Take on some identification workshops particularly of Sphagnum and the relevant NVC communities

Please can you ensure you promotes invertebrates - at so many of MRG's meetings things were perhaps understanding dominated by a rather "plantcentric" point of view; invertebrates of mires are also extremely important and vital in understanding an ecosystem.

One day discussion meetings, preferably reasonably wide-ranging themes, perhaps defined by method/topic rather than geographic area (for example, ecological monitoring - how, why,

successes & problems) - this sort of thing might be appealing to non-academics whilst being useful to grad students & others, yet appeal to a wider audience than something geographically specific.

Organise a special session within INTERCOL?

A questionnaire has been sent out recently asking members whether they had any pressing research questions which would benefit from us pooling together our expertise/equipment and/or using our national (or even international) geographical distribution. So far 15 responses with some interesting suggestions which need looking into further.

BUDGET:

Closure of the Dr. Meade and Dr. Tallis Account for the sum of £2605.37.