

British Ecological Society Mires Research Group (MRG) Report

October 2005

Field Visits

Mires Research Group field trip to the Norfolk Broads (23rd - 24th April 2005).

This trip was organised by Andy Baird (Queen Mary, University of London) and Jane Bunting (University of Hull) and was attended by six members of the MRG. On the first day we visited the RSPB's nature reserve at Strumpshaw Fen in the Yare valley, and were met by the reserve's manager, Tim Strudwick, who showed us around the range of habitats at the site and explained the RSPB's current and future management of the site. The reserve consists of a range of habitats, including open water, grazing marsh, wet woodland, reed fen, and mixed, tall-herb fen. We were also accompanied by Ben Surridge of the Catchment Science Centre at the University of Sheffield who has recently completed a PhD on the hydrological and nutrient dynamics of the fen peat at Strumpshaw. His work involved an assessment of the importance of (i) ground-water exchanges between the near-surface peat and the underlying mineral aquifer and (ii) water exchanges between the near-surface peat and open water in drainage/irrigation ditches. These exchanges were used to help understand the nutrient (especially phosphorus) dynamics of the peat. Ben showed us around his research sites and discussed the key findings of his work. Together with Andy Baird (one of his PhD supervisors) he discussed the equipment and experimental setup used at his sites and demonstrated one of the new field methods that was used to measure the hydraulic conductivity of the peat (Surridge et al., 2005).

The second day was spent at Upton Fen in the Bure Valley where Jane Bunting (University of Hull) and Martyn Waller (Kingston-upon-Thames University) reported on a NERC-funded project investigating the pollen signal of the present-day vegetation gradient in valley wetlands. Jane and Martyn discussed how the project team were able to explore a landscape where dryland woodland, wet ash woodland, alder and willow carr graded into one another, making it a plausible analogue for Holocene coastal and estuarine alder fen peats. They explained the sampling methods and vegetation survey, and also the implications of their results for the interpretation of pollen diagrams from alder carr peats throughout lowland Britain (Binney *et al.*, 2005; Bunting *et al.*, 2005; Waller *et al.*, 2005).

Field trip at the BES annual meeting 2004

For the last two years the MRG has organised a field visit the day before the BES annual meeting to a site close to the meeting. This year the membership was asked to come up with a site close enough to Hatfield and we came up with nothing. For the 2005 BES in Oxford I know of a few sites that would be interesting to the group (Cothill fen (SAC), Snelsmore valley mire, Otmoor) so for next year at least we will continue having a field trip linked to the BES annual meeting. For the Oxford meeting it is still to be decided whether the field visit should be the day before the meeting or on the Wednesday afternoon.

The MRG at the BES 2005

Over recent years good presentations have been given in the mire ecology session at the BES annual meeting but the audiences have been small in comparison to most other sessions at the BES. We proposed to change the name of the mire ecology session to the wetland ecology session in the hope of increasing the audience. The first talk this year had a good audience (approx 40) but the following talk was cancelled and people did not return for the remaining talks and as a consequence the audience was very small to the extent that a couple of the speakers told me they would not request to be in the wetlands session in the future. Already other speakers working on peat have not requested the mire/wetland session to reach a broader audience. I was not convinced that a change to wetlands ecology was a good choice when informed by some that they nearly did not come to the session as the peat they work on is so drained that they do not think of their sites as wetlands(!). The wetlands session was at the same time as a soil session, which many found frustrating. We suggest that next year there be no Wetland or Mire session but hope to put together a Thematic session on Bog restoration.

Over the last three years the AGM meetings have been well attended and dynamic. However this was not the case this year – only four people were present although there were more MRG members present at the conference but they elected to attend some of the other activities. The error in the conference book stating two different times may not have helped, but I don't think it made a significant difference. There are too interesting activities on offer at the same time as the MRG AGM (career session & Rothamsted visit) and also a lack of enthusiasm for the MRG.

Name change

I consulted the membership about a name change from the Mires Research Group to the wetlands Research group. All respondents were in favour of the name change but only 9

people responded. I was waiting to discuss it further with more members at the MRG AGM but with only 4 people present this was not very successful. Last year I was unable to put effort into the special topics group but this year I will be able to put more effort into in an attempt to revitalise it (under its current name or a different one).

Mail-base and Web page

The BES-mires mail base is continuing but this year it has mainly been used as a means for me to communicate with the membership. Very few people are using it for their own exchange of information or gaining advice. Nothing has been done recently with the Web pages. Was there a positive outcome on the request to have £500 per specialist group to help improve and maintain the web pages?

No progress has been made on the topic of a more regular newsletter, a notice in the Bulletin to encourage people to renew their membership or on placing MRG members contact and expertise on the Web pages

Future events:

The SWS (Society of Wetland Scientists) is starting up a European Chapter and Jane Bunting and Chris Freeman (both MRG members) are hosting the inaugural meeting on 6-7 Jan 2006 in Bangor. There will be a field visit to Anglesey fens followed by papers and a meeting discussing the remit of the Pan-European SWS including its role as a forum for all national wetland groups to get together and exchange information. Ideally the MRG would be represented if possible with financial support from the BES.

Members have been consulted on the idea of a Thematic topic on Bog Restoration and Management particularly in relation to hydrology and *Sphagnum* growth for the 2006 meeting (?). This would tie in with the ending of several large research projects on restoration and a review carried out by DEFRA. The response has been very positive.

Hans Joosten (in biology at Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-University in Greifswald, Germany), who is very active in this field has been suggested by several people. Line Rochefort or Jonathan Price (Canada) have also been suggested.

Several people responded by offering talks e.g.

Simon Caporn (Manchester Metropolitan University) *Sphagnum* recovery on the Southern Pennines in relation to air pollution.

Jillian Labadz and team (Nottingham trent University). Raised bogs, hydrological function and vegetation (work we've been doing in Cumbria with English Nature & Environment Agency)

and/or

Blanket bog responses to gully blocking in the Peak District (with Severn Trent Water & National Trust).

Val Standen (Durham University). Invertebrates and mire restoration

People to contact would include Jack Rieley, Faisal Parrish for their work in Indonesia; Michael Steiner (Austria/Switzerland). And of course there are all the UK wardens such as Joan Daniels and conservation administrators e.g. Rob Stoneman, Stuart Brooks, Roger Meade, Richard Lindsay.

There is some interest in a site visit just before the Oxford BES meeting or during the Wednesday afternoon activities. The sites suggested are RSPB Otmoor Nature Reserve, Cothill fen (SAC) and a valley mire in Snelsmore common. *Sphagnum* identification and perhaps mire insect i.d. lead by experienced members of the group e.g. Prof Clymo and Val Standen could also be included as new members commonly request this.

Budget 2004

	Amount	Claimed	Comment
i.d. visit	£300	None	Did not happen
Norfolk broad visit	£300	None	The members all came using their own transport and made their own arrangements for accommodation
Field visit BES Hatfield	£300	None	No suitable site was found
Registration accommodation and travel to the BES in Hatfield	£250	£62	One day registration (£30) Travel (£32 i.e. 2*64 miles at 25p per mile)

Budget request 2005

My registration and food at the BES in Oxford	£200
Organisation and transport for field visit before or during the BES meeting in Oxford.	£300
Registration, accommodation & transport to Bangor SWS meeting in Jan 06.	£200
Help with Web pages	£500??

Deborah Pearce 19th September 05.