

EuroMAB work in urban areas

Extract from EuroMAB 2000 Proceedings

<http://www.nmw.ac.uk/mab/Proc2000/contents.htm>

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I was asked to talk to you about urban-focussed work being done under the aegis of national MAB Committees across the EuroMAB zone. I cannot do so because, in the time available to me, I have not been able to gather the necessary information. In some instances, I know of no relevant work in progress. In others, I know that useful work is being done, but not whether it is connected formally - or even informally - to MAB.

In the heyday of MAB Project Number 11, a single telephone call to the international coordinator in UNESCO would have produced a fairly complete list of ongoing work of substance. This is no longer possible and those, like me, with limited or no access to the Internet have particular difficulty in getting any sense of what is going on. I have some doubts too, that access to web pages would produce the necessary information about anything which is not a high priority subject area within the current MAB programme. I wonder whether this is not, in itself, an indication of a need for a coordinated attempt to post information about projects and contact people and, further, to network this in printed form to everyone on the list of contacts. I know that this would be welcomed by practitioners in the UK. If participants at this meeting can help by providing brief details of what is being done under the aegis of MAB in their countries which is focussed on urban areas and, importantly, the names, addresses and e-mail addresses of contacts who can give details, I will undertake to bring it together and circulate it.

Since the 1970s, a great deal has been done world-wide, and particularly in Euro MAB countries, to add to our knowledge about urban systems, their ecology, their functioning, the relationship between human well-being and the environments in which people live and in the impacts of urbanisation across the whole footprint of towns and cities. By no means all of this has been done within the framework of MAB, but a great deal was. Project Number 11, using very little money, fostered projects, discussions, and workshops large and small. The workshops and consultations were particularly valuable to me in expanding contacts and, through this exchange of views and data, led to invaluable advances in thinking. The Project was pioneering and tried to link people's needs with the sound science necessary to provide for them. However, the past few years have seen the urban focus lost in MAB, although some National Committees have encouraged those anxious to do so to continue urban projects within their programmes. A great deal of work is still being done— the Long Term Ecological Research (LTER) programmes in Baltimore and Phoenix in the USA and Urban Regeneration and the Environment (URGENT) programmes in South Wales, the West Midlands, and the Central Belt in the UK being examples – but neither of these are within MAB.

It is ironic that, after so long leading the field in the work needed to underpin attempts to apply sustainable development principles to urban systems, UNESCO-MAB terminated the programme of work just as the political climate changed enough to see the vision of sustainable cities become enshrined in national policies in many countries. I think that a valuable opportunity to show that MAB was engaged in work essential for the long-term development of human society has been lost. It is also true that the science on which some of the dogma and mythology of environmental management and societal manipulation is based is suspect and an authoritative science-based lead, which MAB could have given, is missing. The demise of Project Number 11 left a vacuum which others will now try to fill. I hope that John Celecia, whose personal drive saw so much achieved, will be encouraged by the current recognition of the value of this work.

I was, therefore, very pleased, some weeks ago, to be encouraged by Peter Bridgewater to start to look at the biosphere reserve philosophy in connection with urban systems. This would indeed give the chance to review the contribution this approach can make to the debate about sustainable cities. It would also bring MAB into the political reckoning as a major contribution in helping develop, enunciate, and reach political targets. If MAB can show the direct relevance of its work to the daily lives of millions of people and to the development of society in this way, then governments become interested partners. The suggestion that we examine the value of applying the biosphere reserve model to urban systems will have the support of the UK. We have in fact helped prepare the ground by hosting a workshop on the topic in Manchester six years ago. I am pleased to say we will be publishing the report on that meeting very shortly!

The Urban Forum in the UK

In the absence of a EuroMAB overview, the best I can offer you is a summary of the work of the UK-MAB Committee's Urban Forum. It achieves its objectives by combining monitoring and review of policies and policy implementation with a broad spectrum of international ideas, political thinking, academic studies and research. By crossing disciplinary boundaries, the Urban Forum seeks to integrate thinking and data from a number of specialised areas and apply these to the design and management of urban systems. The objectives are to:

- identify and prioritise key topics;
- identify commissioning agencies and other funders of research in the fields of interest and communicate the Urban Forum's views on research needs;
- develop ways of publicising the Urban Forum's work to selected professional audiences;
- identify and accredit good examples of land management and public education;
- help and advise statutory nature conservation agencies on the benefits of nature conservation in and around towns and cities.

There are over 20 members who represent a broad spectrum of interests and disciplines in urban ecology and conservation. They include academics, local authority officers, officers in government agencies, people from voluntary organisations, consultants and journalists. Collectively these people contribute to the continuing reputation of the UK as a centre of excellence in this field. The Urban

Forum is the only body in the UK which brings together such a wide range of practitioners, has such a broad agenda, and involves people dealing with a broad range of activities from community action to academic research and international networking. Face-to-face intensive meetings are held four times a year, but topics under review are dealt with by small working groups of two to six people. Such groups are given an agreed timetable and output. The output might be an internal discussion paper, a workshop or seminar, or a published paper. The combination of approaches provides a unique opportunity to generate ideas and gives flexibility.

I will mention only a few of the most significant pieces of current work:

- following a discussion paper about the ecological value of previously developed land, the paper was revised and published in various forms in relevant professional journals. We feel it important to present our ideas to as wide an audience as possible.
- a discussion paper has been produced on the benefits for mental health and well-being from urban greenspace.
- a critical review about the use by local authorities of their powers to set up statutory nature reserves and of the attitudes of the statutory nature conservation agencies as consultees in this process was published in 1998. An analysis has now been completed of the impact of this review on the policies and programmes of the agencies.
- a workshop is being set up to discuss the state of knowledge about the functioning and significance of the plant and animal communities so prevalent in urban situations and made up of species drawn from a wide range of global biogeographical areas.
- the concept of biosphere reserves as applied to urban areas is being further developed and the document derived from the 1994 MAB workshop published.
- a paper synthesising current thinking about urban parks and other semi-natural open spaces is being written.
- when Government publishes its Urban White Paper later this year, the Forum has set up a project to analyse and provide a critique of proposals. The Forum has contributed to the public consultations leading up to the White Paper.

Finally, I would like to mention the Forum's Urban Wildlife Award for Excellence. This Award is made to projects in the UK which reach defined high standards. The majority of Awards are made to projects on the ground and those receiving the Award are authorised to use the MAB logo on their literature and signage. Explanatory notes say that projects should:

- have nature conservation (wildlife and/or earth science) in urban areas as a main objective in management.
- have a major element of at least two of: curriculum-based environmental education; site interpretation (informal education); enjoyment of natural features by local people; acting as a focus for nature clubs or other environmentally focused social activities; art and environment.
- have reasonable facilities; ideally a centre building but certainly basic signs, paths and sufficient information available to give a sound basis for a descriptive leaflet and site map (if none already exist). Sites should be either accessible by public transport or have somewhere that cars can be left nearby so overseas visitors are not inconvenienced.

- involve the local authority, Wildlife Trust or other reputable organisations capable of giving the project stability and efficient back up and, ideally, local residents, schools and organisations. The involvement of central government departments or agencies, national or regional organisations, colleges or universities and business or industry would be bonuses.
- have a reasonable plan of site management, history of the project and other details of the site and project available and accessible to anyone wanting more detailed information than that given in the composite project pack. This would include to enquirers writing from overseas as well as on-site visitors. Since an objective is to help others learn, the project organisers must be prepared to be frank to serious enquirers about any problems encountered or mistakes made.
- have a guaranteed continuity for at least 10 years from the present in terms of both security of tenure and site management.
- be able to meet visitors on site, if needs be by special arrangement.
- be of high quality in terms of their social or educational uses and/or their nature conservation values. These are UK flagship projects and should reflect this. Quality is not always synonymous with neatness or a 'professional' gloss.

Since a visit is required from an assessor and the assessor's report and recommendations are made available to all applicants for the Award, the applicants get what is, in effect, a free expert audit to help project development. The UK suggests that this is a model worth extending internationally with generally agreed criteria, but ones flexible enough to allow for national interpretation to fit local needs and local conditions.

Recommendations

In summary, may I reiterate my three recommendations:

- that details of current work being done within national MAB programmes in EuroMAB countries be listed with brief descriptions and contact people identified; that the consolidated list be made available as hard copy to all contact people listed; and that national web pages carry the relevant details of urban projects for the country concerned.
- that we follow the UNESCO prompting to contribute to an examination of the value of applying the biosphere reserve model to urban systems.
- that the UK model of an Urban Wildlife Award for Excellence be developed to give an internationally recognised accreditation system for high quality projects.

All of this can be done at little cost - thus following the traditions of the pioneering Project Number 11 which achieved so much with so little.