



LONG-TERM EXPERIMENTS ESSENTIAL FOR OUR FUTURE

In his piece on lost long-term records in the previous issue of *The Niche*, Rob Marrs reminded me that Terry Wells kept A.S. Thomas's chalk grassland transect records under his desk at Monks Wood for 20 years before they were lost. In the very next room, Dick Steele stored the records made by Eustace Jones in Lady Park Wood. They lay unused for a decade before he then moved to a non-woodland job elsewhere. His room was cleared by the (then) Woodlands Department secretary Valerie Burton who was instructed to 'dump everything unless it looked useful'. Some weeks later I found a note on my desk asking me to look at a pile of papers that 'might be worth keeping', and amongst these I found not only the Lady Park records from 1944 onwards, but also similar records from transects across Clairinsh, a wooded island in Loch Lomond recorded in 1961. If I had been on fieldwork that week, both would have been thrown into the skip. By sheer serendipity, the papers now sit in my spare bedroom.

The Clairinsh records were a surprise because the original recorder had left the former Nature Conservancy to become a timber merchant and the warden in 1961 had been promoted several times and was now a senior officer in southern England. Meanwhile, the second copy had been lodged with the University of Stirling and forgotten. Twenty-four years after the baseline had been recorded, the reserve warden and his line managers had no knowledge that it existed, and the one

member of staff who did know was no longer connected with the reserve.

Other transect records from Denny Wood in the New Forest, started in 1955 by John Manners and Joyce Lambert, were thrown out by the Botany Department at the University of Southampton in the 1980s. Fortunately, the (then) Nature Conservancy Council had acquired copies. These survived unused until 1999, when Ed Mountford utilised them to study beech woodlands.

A further example highlights how an unintended baseline was preserved by publication. In 1921, R. Hansford-Worth wrote about Wistman's Wood on Dartmoor and included a map of trees in a plot and their sizes. For the author this was a descriptive aid, but for us in the 1980s it would become a baseline to measure change if we could relocate the plot. Fortunately, the trees are so distinctive that recreating the Worth plot was straightforward.

Our experiences confirm Laurie Taylor's (1989) finding from bird studies that survival and resurrection of long-term studies depends on individuals, not institutions, plus large slices of luck. In the case of woodlands, such studies must outlast the career of the originator before they become long-term, overcome the limitations of the customary short-term funding and combat discrimination against open-ended research. Few ecologists will match Oliver Rackham, whose lifetime of field observations have been carefully

curated by his many admirers and will be available to trace changes, much like he was doing before he passed away. For the future, we need an Ecological Archives Centre to hold both formal records and informal baselines represented by the photographs and field records of retiring ecologists. Surely it is not beyond us as resourceful ecologists to find a sustainable solution to this challenge?

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