

Members
Society of Australian Systematic Biologists

September 13, 2000

I believe that it has now become quite important to clearly communicate with our stakeholders in the scientific community the changes in direction for the Australian Biological Resources Study (as well as the structural rearrangements), as a result of the recent review, and as discussed at the last ABRS Advisory Committee meeting. If nothing else, this will serve to dispel any incorrect or misleading speculation about what is happening here.

So, below is some information which you may wish find useful. If you have any queries, please contact me at the address given below.

Changes at the Australian Biological Resources Study (ABRS)

ABRS has been undergoing a significant re-ordering of its priorities and structure. To remain relevant and effective, a long-standing program such as ABRS needs to be responsive to changes in its client base and their expectations, as well as to government priorities. The current adjustments follow a Departmental assessment of ABRS's existing capabilities, and the perceived need to position the program to confront the nation's taxonomic impediment more aggressively and to deliver high-quality taxonomic information to biodiversity professionals and other clients in a more focussed and efficient manner.

Electronic publishing to become the standard

One of the central objectives of ABRS - to document and disseminate information on the biota - is, we believe, now best served by a progressive move to electronic publishing, both through the medium of CD-ROM / DVD and that of the World Wide Web. Most of ABRS's products are reference works, with the majority of users requiring only selected subsets of the information at any given time. Web-publishing allows access to a much wider audience, who should be able to search more effectively for specific material and extract it as required. The prospect of broader client reach, easy updating, and rapid feedback makes this form of delivery an attractive proposition. CD-ROM (and, eventually, DVD) products provide a convenient and readily transportable store of information, and also allow ABRS to cater to the burgeoning interest in interactive keys.

ABRS has decided to discontinue production of printed versions of the "Zoological Catalogue of Australia" and the "Fauna of Australia". Manuscript "Catalogues" that are currently in-house will be edited and printed, but subsequent treatments of groups will be directly databased. The "Fauna" has proved to be a successful series, but long delays in production and escalating costs for the volumes have prompted the decision to move to web-based publishing. Thus, future treatments will appear progressively in self-contained sections (such as families or superfamilies). This approach will have the advantage of making material immediately available as it is completed, rather than kept in abeyance until all the components of a 'volume' are processed.

While demand persists, the "Flora of Australia" will continue to be produced in paper form. The first of a new series, the "Algae of Australia", is also in production, as are further volumes of the "Fungi of Australia". These will initially be produced in both electronic and hard-copy.

Last year, ABRS launched the Australian Biodiversity Information Facility (ABIF) for the web-based delivery of ABRS information and partnered products. This is to be enhanced and expanded, with additional material from earlier volumes of the "Fauna of Australia", as well as published and new volumes of the "Flora" and "Fungi", becoming progressively available. Electronic versions of new and existing "Zoological Catalogues" are also being uploaded. Improved search facilities will be developed to allow easy retrieval of text and other information. Over the next 6-12 months, users should begin to see significant changes to the ABIF site at <http://www.anbg.gov.au/abrs/abif.htm> as

work progresses.

Committee changes to improve efficiency and expand perspectives

The resources of the ABRS Advisory Committee are to be extended to encompass contributions from a greater range of sectors, in addition to its broadly representative taxonomic expertise. From December, the Committee will include the current experts from a range of taxonomic disciplines, as well as new representatives from the conservation movement, land-care, industry and community education. This is intended to bring a wider perspective to the Committee's work, with renewed focus on the practical application of taxonomic knowledge to environmental issues. The expanded Committee will take on a number of the activities of the former ABRS Editorial Committee, which has now been discontinued. Through its Participatory Program, ABRS will continue to support basic taxonomic research, as well as directed studies into groups or geographic areas that the Advisory Committee believes warrant particular attention. It is not anticipated that the new members of the Advisory Committee will be involved in directly assessing research grants applications.

Structural rearrangements to reflect the diversity of ABRS activities

ABRS has been reorganised into a number of discrete scientific sub-programs that better reflect the diversity of activities and the greater emphasis that will now be given to lesser-known elements of the biota. This change is consistent with recent recommendations of the Biological Diversity Advisory Committee (BDAC) and the "National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity", both of which urge that greater attention be paid to those taxonomic groups for which our knowledge is most limited. As part of its new business plan, ABRS will be seeking partnership opportunities and linkages with environment and other government programs, in order to extend its resources and accelerate its activities.

The internal reorganisation means that the first point of contact for ABRS should now be through either the Director or the appropriate sub-program leader, depending on the area of specific interest:

Director (Acting)	Dr Geoff Dyne	gdyne@ea.gov.au	(02) 6250-944
Invertebrates	Dr Alice Wells	alice.wells@ea.gov.au	(02) 6250-9444
Vertebrates	Dr Graham Ross	graham.ross@ea.gov.au	(02) 6250-9435
Protists	Dr Keith Houston	keith.houston@ea.gov.au	(02) 6250-9436
Algae	Dr Tony Orchard	tony.orchard@ea.gov.au	(02) 6250-9443
Bryophytes	Dr Patrick McCarthy	patrick.mccarthy@ea.gov.au	(02) 6250-9447
Fungi	Dr Cheryl Grgurinovic	cheryl.grgurinovic@ea.gov.au	(02) 6250-9446
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Vascular Plants	Dr Tony Orchard	tony.orchard@ea.gov.au	(02) 6250-9443
ABIF (Flora)	Ms Helen Thompson	helen.thompson@ea.gov.au	(02) 6250-9445
ABIF (Fauna)	Dr Keith Houston	keith.houston@ea.gov.au	(02) 6250-9436

Feedback from clients will assist ABRS to refine its service delivery

Many of these changes are intended to improve the efficiency of ABRS, expand the delivery options for its products, and extend their value and relevance to a greater range of clients. After the current transitional period, users of ABRS's services will be encouraged to provide feedback on how successful we have been in meeting these objectives, and to make practical suggestions about other possible enhancements.

Yours sincerely

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