

A summary of progress: the first 15 years of the Tropical Bryology Group

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Introduction

The Tropical Bryology Group (TBG) was created with a view to encouraging and promoting research on tropical bryophytes. It has been successful, perhaps even beyond the expectations of its founders, in achieving its original objectives. The TBG, specifically the core members of the group, have contributed to a) increasing the knowledge of certain poorly-known tropical areas, b) the scientific understanding of certain taxonomic groups, and c) collecting efforts and herbarium activities in several countries. They have produced over 50 publications resulting directly from their TBG involvement (see bibliography). The main focus of research has been the African bryophyte flora. A website for the TBG has been developed to contain and allow access to this rich source of tropical bryological information and resources.

After 15 years, and with a change of TBG co-ordinator, it seems timely to review the progress made by the TBG between 1986 and 2002. This review is based on the original TBG discussion document (see publication 1 on the TBG website, currently at www.nhm.ac.uk/hosted_sites/bbstbg). Future directions of the TBG were reviewed at the 2003 AGM and will be considered elsewhere.

Formation of the TBG

The formation of a Tropical Bryology Group was first proposed by Longton (1985a, b) who stressed the need to focus bryological research efforts on tropical areas. The tropics, in comparison to temperate zones, were bryologically under-recorded and remained at greater risk from habitat destruction as areas were exploited for their rich resources. It was considered especially important to encourage collaboration and co-operation between the members of a TBG and bryologists working in the tropics.

The TBG was formed as a result of an informal meeting of interested parties during the annual meeting of the British Bryological Society in Leeds in 1986; the sixteen attendees discussed setting up a TBG, its aims and objectives, co-ordination of actions, and particular matters of interest to each party. The group was finally initiated in 1988, when its objectives were agreed and a report prepared by Martin Wigginton was discussed. This document included various proposals for the activities of the group, based on suggestions made by all the interested parties. The original proposals are summarised here in the following sections, with comments on progress since 1986 shown in italics.

Review of the proposals in the TBG discussion document

Collecting

It was agreed that systematic collecting of bryophytes was one of the most urgent tasks because of the rapid and continuing loss of habitats, especially in the tropics. Africa was subject to the least bryological focus and was considered to be a region where the greatest bryological contribution could be made. Literature for that continent was poor or lacking for many countries/regions, and previous collecting efforts had focused mostly on hot-spots such as Mt Kilimanjaro. The TBG could do the following:

- advise on the most important and threatened areas; [*The International Association of Bryologists (IAB) have since undertaken this objective, but the input for Africa was from members of the TBG.*]
- advise on how to collect in the tropics, on the habitats and niches of bryophytes, on the care of collections, etc; advise on the documentation of collections, stressing the importance of good collecting and full documentation; advise on photographic documentation; establish links with university expedition groups, seeking to stimulate interest in bryophyte collecting; and prepare a 'Guide to bryophyte collecting in the tropics'; [*These objectives have mostly been achieved, and documents are available on the TBG website. A guide to bryophyte collecting, specimen processing, herbarium techniques and literature for the tropics has been published (O'Shea, 1989).*]
- establish links with other organisations, such as the Royal Geographical Society, armed services expedition groups, Operation Raleigh, etc., if collecting can be encouraged by these means; [*This has not been done, mainly because their focus has been on objectives and areas that were not compatible with useful bryological activity.*]
- act as a source of information on places in which to collect (national parks, nature

reserves and other wildlife areas) and on practical matters such as travel and export of collections; [*This has not been done formally, although informal advice has been given to a number of individuals.*]

- assist BBS members in overseas collecting trips, either as individuals or as a group; [*Many TBG members continue to act in this capacity.*]
- organise surveys in threatened areas and habitats; [*This has been achieved in part but remains an ongoing concern as more habitats come under threat.*]
- collaborate in major research initiatives, such as those based in Korup, Cameroon, or Gunung Mulu, Borneo. [*This has not been done. Instead, focus was directed towards regional collecting activities, e.g. in Uganda and Malawi. The reason for this was the lack of interest within such research projects in supporting bryophyte-orientated activities – the TBG would have had to work in areas of limited bryological interest or in areas that had already been documented.*]

Herbaria

It was noted that there were many un-worked bryophyte collections in private and national herbaria in the UK, and possibly collections that remained undocumented within local and national institutions. It was considered important that the TBG assisted with this by:

- locating collections of tropical material held in local institutions or privately in Britain, and maintaining an inventory of these herbaria, including details of the state of the collections (e.g. whether the collections are identified, fully documented, etc.); [*This was done but the information gathered was erratic and unreliable, and the document was withdrawn from the TBG website. It would be worth preparing a revised document for the website.*]
- sorting and documenting un-worked collections held in institutions, including documenting information from herbarium packets. This should be readily possible for

small collections, but daunting indeed for the larger ones held at the London Natural History Museum (BM); [*This has been achieved in part for some collections at BM but reviewing other collections proved difficult for two main reasons:*

i. Becoming aware of the existence of collections.

Information is only available at some herbaria, and the major collections are at BM. Many herbaria will only allow specimens to be sent to other herbaria, and not to private individuals, although BM allowed un-accessioned unidentified material to be sent out for the Mosses and Liverworts of Uganda (MALOU) project.

ii. Identifying the specimens. The difficulties of identifying tropical African collections became clear following the Malawi expedition. Although participants came fairly quickly up to speed in identifying to the level of family and genus, some genera are more or less impossible to work on without taxonomic revisions. This brought to the fore the idea of a Flora of families and genera for Africa, as a first step (Guide to Bryophytes of Africa (GBA)).]

- acting as a focus for the exchange of specimens, and for loans of collections. [*The TBG has no official herbarium or reference collection, and thus exchanges and loans of collections have mostly been done through arrangements between individuals and sourced from private herbaria.*]

Data storage and processing

The increasing importance of computers and computer programs was noted. It was suggested that TBG members could benefit from better data handling, for instance in maintaining databases on the locations of tropical herbaria, and lists of taxa, collections, specialists, locations of reference material, etc. [*Brian O'Shea wrote and manages TAXA, a piece of software which has been used by a few people in the TBG to create a database of literature, scientific names and collection information. However, the system pre-dates Windows and has a large number of facilities that would require extensive development to convert to the Windows environment. Other people use different systems to manage their data and there is no centralised data facility for the TBG.*]

Research

It was felt that the TBG could make significant contributions to taxonomic and ecological research in the tropics by:

- undertaking primary taxonomic research, and advising on methods; advising on research needs for taxonomic groups and geographical areas; and specialising in particular taxonomic groups; [*These points have been addressed by the research carried out within the framework of the Malawi and Uganda projects (see bibliography, and TBG reports and newsletters on the website).*]
- establishing a panel of referees as our expertise develops; [*This has been developed during the work on collections from Malawi and Uganda. Co-ordinators are available for all African families, who can either confirm identifications or pass specimens on to other experts.*]
- holding regular workshops to enhance the expertise of the whole group. Individual members could tutor on their specialisation; [*One workshop was held in Cambridge on 21 September 1990, and was attended by 14 people.*]
- co-ordinating studies of un-worked herbaria, with a view to placing specimens in at least a broad taxonomic group. Indeed, even 'moss' or 'hepatic' written on a herbarium packet would be a step forward; [*This work has been undertaken by TBG members, especially focusing on Ugandan collections at the BM (e.g. F. Rose's collections). However, herbaria still hold thousands of well-documented but as yet unidentified specimens from interesting areas.*]
- maintaining a reference collection of micro-slides of tropical material; [*No slide reference collection was created, and although slide collections have been made by individual researchers, they cannot be regarded as permanent. It should be noted that making 'permanent' micro-slides requires access to chemicals that are usually only available to laboratories.*]
- producing checklists and undertaking monographic work. [*Checklists have been*

produced for Malawi, Uganda and sub-Saharan Africa, and a number of African genera have been monographed.]

Literature/information

The small amount of recent taxonomic literature on bryophytes, and the difficulty of obtaining this literature, could be addressed by:

- seeking ways of obtaining essential literature and making it available; advising on appropriate literature for particular taxonomic groups; and establishing a library of literature pertaining to tropical bryology; [*The TBG has no centralised source of literature (reprint collection or library). Instead, individuals have developed personal collections of literature that can be shared with other TBG members. A literature list was prepared (Pócs & O'Shea, 1991), but this is now out of date. It will be replaced partly by GBA, and hopefully will be kept up to date on the TBG website.*]
- preparing translations of important literature published in other languages; [*Many keys to tropical taxa, especially for Africa, have been translated by TBG members and are available on the TBG website, although the rate of this activity has slowed in recent years. Some of the translated keys are now known to be unreliable, and revised versions are awaited.*]
- keeping TBG members informed through information circulars or a newsletter; [*Achieved through the publication of TBG newsletters 1-18. A wider audience has been reached via annual progress reports in the BBS Bulletin.*]
- establishing and maintaining links with other sources of information, e.g. IAB and specialists in the UK and overseas; [*Many specialists are involved in GBA and MALOU, and several members are now regular participants at international conferences.*]
- acting as a focus for advice and information on tropical bryology. [*Many enquiries are now dealt with, and usually it is possible to give assistance.*]

Overseas responsibilities

Unfortunately, only limited responses were received from overseas members for this category. They indicated the following needs:

- a desire to develop cryptogamic herbaria in the country of origin; [*The TBG has made contributions to the herbaria of MAL (Malawi), MHU (Uganda) and PRE (South Africa) as part of their activities.*]
- a desire to collaborate in research; [*The TBG has provided literature to researchers overseas and helped with identifications, but so far has not developed extensive research relations. It is perhaps easier for TBG individuals based at universities, museums or botanical gardens to establish collaborations than for the group as a whole to do this.*]
- a suggestion that the BBS (TBG) should arrange collecting trips in collaboration with local bryologists. Some overseas institutions cannot support travel for collecting even locally; [*This has been done in Malawi in collaboration with staff at MAL and in Uganda in collaboration with staff at MHU and Makerere University, both with funding found by the TBG.*]
- provision of lab space for visiting bryologists; [*This has not been realised by the TBG, as it is not something the TBG itself can supply; instead it must rely on individual members based at universities, museums or botanical gardens with such facilities.*]
- a request for the exchange of information, literature and specimens, and for general assistance; [*This has been achieved within the framework of the Malawi and Uganda projects, through individual interactions between TBG members, and by information made available on the TBG website and in TBG publications/newsletters.*]
- a suggestion that the BBS (TBG?) seek research grants to assist tropical bryologists; [*This has not been done – funding remains a problem.*]
- a suggestion that the TBG collaborates with international organisations that are already

involved in conservation in the country; [*This has not been done. It is difficult to achieve this objective without first obtaining research grants, something that is difficult for the TBG as it stands.*]

- advertising the availability of bryological training. [*This has not been done by the TBG, although partly-subsidised training is now available through courses in Kampala and Helsinki. A local workshop was run in Uganda as part of the TBG project there. Academic institutions are more likely to get such grants; for instance, NHM is currently seeking funding.*]

Conservation

The TBG could act in an advisory capacity to:

- propose conservation strategies for tropical bryophytes in specific areas; [*Such information on Ugandan forests was part of the report submitted to the Darwin Initiative, but generally has not been undertaken by the TBG.*]
- have an input into conservation work undertaken by other organisations. [*This has not been done by the TBG directly. Instead, contributions have been made in the form of taxonomic work, production of checklists, and generally by increasing the bryological understanding of particular areas. GBA would be a major contribution to getting bryophytes included in more general surveys.*]

Funding

Funding to facilitate research efforts by the TBG was discussed. Funding could be sought for:

- collecting trips; [*Successful for the Malawi and Uganda projects.*]
- support for resident bryologists from tropical countries. [*Not much money was obtained for this purpose but some was used to support involvement in collecting trips in Malawi and Uganda, and in running a workshop in Uganda.*]

Funding could be sought from:

- Government and international organisations, such as the British Council, European Community, United Nations Development Programme and the World Conservation Union (IUCN); [*No funding was applied for/obtained from these sources, except for funding under the UK Darwin Initiative.*]
- non-governmental organisations, such as the Royal Society, Royal Geographical Society and National Geographic; [*These sources have been used to fund conference attendance by TBG members.*]
- commercial sector, e.g. banks, industrials, forestry. [*No funding has been applied for/obtained from these sources.*]

Seeking funds was found to involve the preparation of detailed proposals that required a large time commitment on the part of the writer/s. This is a problem that is difficult to resolve in the short term.

Other work areas

- It was suggested that the TBG may consider the need to 'recruit' skilled botanical illustrators to produce figures for taxonomic papers. [*This remains an issue. Several skilled artists are contributing to GBA and MALOU, and BBS funding has been granted for providing illustrations for MALOU.*]

Progress against the general and specific aims of the TBG

The initial aims outlined by the TBG in the discussion paper included:

- setting up a small working party to chart the way forward;
- specialising in one particular geographical region of the tropics (Africa);
- developing a focus on particular taxonomic groups;
- collaborating in the *Bryologia Africana* project.

[These were all achieved. The group was able to plan and manage the Malawi and Uganda expeditions and make significant contributions to the bryological knowledge of these countries. Although the Bryologia Africana project (to produce a species-level bryophyte Flora of Africa), managed by Missouri Botanical Garden, has not progressed, an essential precursor has been initiated in GBA, which will form the basis of a future species-level Flora. The need to overcome the fundamental barrier of taxon identification is central to progress within the TBG as well as in Africa as a whole. This should remain a key objective, leading to the production of GBA, MALOU and, in the longer term, Bryologia Africana.]

Less progress was made against the other objectives:

- to have a planned strategy and to set targets, with some timetabling; [Not done, but probably impractical when TBG members are contributing in their spare time.]
- to investigate the possibility of collecting trips in collaboration with local bryologists/institutions, and to investigate sources of funding; [This was achieved in part through the Malawi and Uganda projects.]
- to investigate ways in which the TBG could assist overseas members, perhaps including the exchange of information, literature and collections; [Achieved in part – a number of queries have resulted in small pieces of collaborative work.]
- to investigate means of making bryological literature more available to TBG members. [Only partly achieved by those who have access to the literature and are able to make copies of it.]

Summary: the success of the TBG, 1986-2002

The contributions of the TBG to tropical bryology research efforts have been both diverse and far-reaching in effect. Members have made significant contributions to bryological research in the tropics and to increasing the knowledge of tropical bryophytes. The list of publications by TBG members in association with TBG projects highlights this well (see bibliography), with over 30 publications resulting from TBG activities in

Malawi and Uganda. Perhaps the most significant element of TBG research has been the production of local and regional checklists, taxonomic contributions to different Floras, and the development of the *Guide to Bryophytes of Africa* (GBA), the *Liverwort Flora of West Africa* (WAFLO), and *Mosses and Liverworts of Uganda* (MALOU).

The success of the TBG so far can be attributed to the efforts of a core group of researchers, the TBG executive committee, and the TBG coordinators (Martin Wigginton 1986-1988 and Brian O'Shea 1988-2002). For this success to continue we must reconsider the role of the TBG and its future directions and goals.

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Reports of local meetings

South-East Group

Brede High Wood (v.-c. 14), 2 October 2003: hornworts and a hornet

This was a joint meeting of the Southern and South-East Groups. Ironically after a very dry summer and early autumn, the day of the excursion was very wet and limited our list to just 96 species; had the weather been better goodness knows what else we might have found. Brede High Wood and adjacent parts of the Great Saunders Estate cover some six square kilometres, and provide a wide range of habitats on Wealden clays and sandstones. It is one of the few large wooded areas in East Sussex for which there appeared to be almost no bryological records. The day's exploration only embraced the area from south of the B2089 (public car park at TQ804196) down to the northern banks of the Powdermill reservoir

constructed in the 1930s and now owned by Southern Water, and further visits should be a priority. Since the field trip, several waymarked walks through the woods have been installed by Southern Water, making this a practical and attractive place for bryologists and others to visit.

Despite the rain, the woodland rides yielded all the usual suspects (*Fossombronina wondraczekii*, *Archidium alternifolium*, *Dicranella schreberiana*, *D. staphylina*, *Ditrichum cylindricum* and *Pseudephemerum nitidum*). In addition, it was particularly pleasing to see *Anthoceros busnotii* (a new vice-county record) and *Phaeoceros laevis*. Hornworts are increasingly uncommon in south-east England, and indeed Wakehurst Place is one of the few places where a sighting of *Phaeoceros* can be virtually guaranteed. The most notable epiphytes