Book review

Biomar: Biotape reviewer: A guide to marine habitats fauna and flora of Britain and Ireland
Edited by B.E. Picton and M.J. Costello, Environmental Science Unit, Trinity College Dublin; CD Rom; ISBN 0-9526-735-41

The BioMar Biotope Viewer can be reviewed at two different and largely separate levels. First, as the principal output of a survey aimed at describing littoral and sublittoral biotopes, habitats and species around Ireland and, second, as an example of the way in which digital technology can deliver a reporting format that has far greater flexibility than standard paper publication. As an illustrated survey of Irish biotopes, this CD ROM will be widely referred to in North West Europe but will have limited impact beyond. As an example of what can be done, or what could be done three years ago, with interactive methods for the display and interpretation of survey data, it should excite considerable enthusiasm among educators and conservation scientists.

The purpose of the European Union-funded project that produced BioMar Biotope Viewer, was to provide a structured knowledge of coastal biotopes for management and conservation. To this end, data were collected from a broad spread of habitats across the full range of wave-exposure and tidal currents. Given the vast scope of this undertaking and the normal time constraints of research grant funding, it is hardly surprising that coverage is incomplete and that there is an imbalance between the various biotopes and species considered. There is a clear bias towards hard substrata with surprisingly few records of coastal sediment infauna. That aside, the authors have produced a tool that in the hands of teachers, managers and conservationists, will underpin the consistent identification of biotopes and will draw users towards names for many of the most common species that they encounter.

The CD ROM is easily installed and its use is reasonably intuitive. It contains a database that the user can interrogate from a variety of starting points. Site-specific faunal data can be obtained via a map-based interface. Species habitat and biotope information can be generated using drop-down menus. The text at each information level is well illustrated with good-quality, representative photographs. Thorough hypertext linking takes the user around the database to other subjects relevant to their search, including a comprehensive reference list. After very little practice, the database can be manipulated to obtain the most relevant information in the most convenient format.

Digital technology moves very quickly; the computer system that was state-of-the-art
last month is obsolescent today. This raises considerable concern about the useful life of electronic publications. On the other hand, new developments offer considerable scope for the production of frequently updated editions of a document in a format far more flexible than the printed page. The delivery of such systems is a challenge that must be met, as the information in databases, such as that at the core of BioMar Biotope Viewer, is not static. Species names change, biotopes are revised, new records are generated and, hence, CD ROMs become outdated as quickly as books. The updating of CD ROMS by files sent over the Internet is increasingly seen as a way to maintain their currency; the only trouble is that somebody has to be paid to do the job.

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