

Do I *really* need a NVC survey?

If you've been told to commission a National Vegetation Classification (NVC) survey for a site, start by asking yourself two questions - do I *really* need a NVC survey? And if so, what level of detail do I need?

NVC is a tool to describe vegetation types or 'plant communities'. A surveyor uses the NVC to highlight the similarities and differences between the vegetation at a site with the published accounts of NVC communities. These data place the vegetation at a site into context and are often useful in informing site management.

However, NVC is also used in a variety of other ways, including to assess habitat quality, as a method of monitoring vegetation change and as a substitute for a botanical survey. Sometimes these uses of NVC may be inappropriate.

Can I use NVC for monitoring changes in vegetation by repeat surveys?

Yes and no! It depends on the level of detail in the NVC surveys. If a stand of vegetation was community X the first time and was still community X the second time this does not mean that there were no significant changes in the quality of the vegetation. If your site had a detailed NVC survey some years ago and had no system of monitoring the vegetation in place up to now, then another NVC survey at the same level of detail would probably be a useful way of assessing how the site has changed. If not, then you are much better off designing a bespoke monitoring scheme for the site which accurately monitors the aspects of the vegetation on the site that are most important.

Can I use NVC for assessing habitat quality?

No and yes! Although some NVC communities tend to be more species-rich or more semi-natural than others, most communities can vary in species-richness and habitat quality from one stand to another. So, it is not valid to say 'this is community X therefore it is valuable' or 'this is community Y, therefore it is of no value'. Using NVC is a useful **first step** in describing the context of the vegetation before assessing its value.

Is a NVC survey the same as a botanical survey?

No! It is possible to map the NVC communities on a site without including any botanical records whatsoever. Usually an NVC survey will be backed up by botanical records from the various stands, but would not need to list all of the species on the site.

So what is a botanical survey?

In contrast, a good botanical survey would **aim** to list **all** of the species, subspecies, hybrids etc. (because many infraspecific taxa have conservation

value) on the site, with detailed ecological information (including precise location) for the more interesting plants.

Often a full botanical survey is much more likely to inform the assessment of the botanical conservation value of a site than an NVC survey, especially if the NVC survey is carried out by a general ecologist rather than an experienced botanist.

What should an NVC survey include?

- A site map demarcates each stand of vegetation which are labelled with their NVC community (plus sub-community) code and a unique reference number.
- The report describes each NVC community on the site highlighting individual stands of vegetation that are particularly species-rich, contain notable plants or are distinctive from other stands of this community on the site.
- If several stands of the same community occur on the site, floristic tables are a good way of displaying the range of variation in the vegetation at the site. In this situation 1 quadrat should be taken from each stand of the community. If more quadrats are taken in some stands this would introduce an unacceptable level of bias in the data.

Do I need to take 5 quadrats from each stand?

No! Some surveyors assume that they need to take at least 5 quadrats from every stand of vegetation in order to be able to assign their species data into 5 frequency classes and then compare their survey data to the tables published in British Plant Communities. This approach is flawed as you would not expect the data from 5 quadrats in a single stand of vegetation to be close to the range of variation found in the community as a whole over the whole country.

So what level of detail do I need?

Enough detail for the results to be useful. Getting the right level of detail is crucial. A map with NVC codes marked in various places without any supporting data is usually of very limited, if any use. Quadrat data may be useful but is time-consuming to collect and will make your survey more expensive. Other, quicker ways of collecting data on frequency and abundance of the species in each stand may be more appropriate. More detail costs more, but less detail may be of little or no use!

Need to commission a NVC survey? visit www.ptyxis.com

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