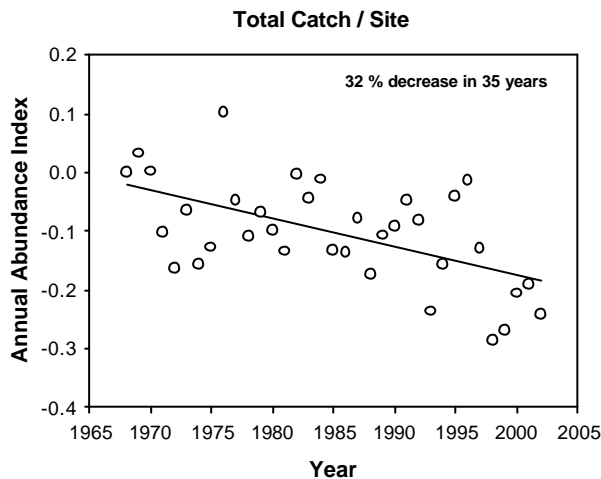
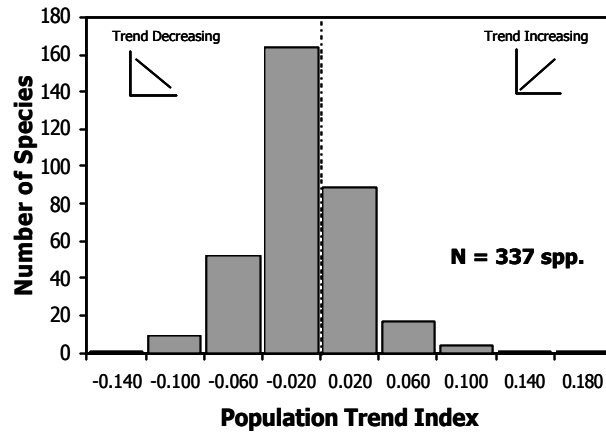


Two thirds of common British moth species are declining

By Kelvin Conrad

British moths are in serious trouble, and two-thirds of common British moth species have declined over the past 35 years, with potentially devastating implications for wildlife. Moths are good indicators of the general health of the environment, because they occupy a wide diversity of habitats and a key position near the base of the food chain for many wildlife species.

Estimates of total trap catches indicate total moth abundance has decreased by about 30% since 1968. The longest running trap, Barnfield, at Rothamsted, shows a decline of more than 60% since the 1930's.



Our latest study of the 337 most common species from the RIS light-traps (Conrad *et al*, J. Insect Con. 8, 119-136), suggests about a fifth of all British moths are losing numbers sharply enough to cause conservationists concern. Worst affected are species, such as the Dusky Thorn and Hedge Rustic, which have decreased by more than 90%. The greatest proportion of declining species is found in the southeast of the UK, while the greatest proportion of increasing species occurs in the

north. Comparing species according to their distribution, life histories and food and habitat preferences suggests declining over-winter survival, possibly due to climate change, and loss of 'less-manicured' habitats, are contributing strongly to the declines.

Other species, however, are thriving on recent changes. Numbers of the Scarce Footman have increased greatly since the 1960's. This species, like other lichen feeders, is on the increase, possibly because lower air pollution is encouraging better lichen growth.

These results have attracted a good deal of media attention. Butterfly Conservation, our collaborators in this project, which has been funded in part by the Esmée Fairburn Foundation, has found the results alarming and is motivated to include plans for common moths in their moth conservation strategies, as well as to increase public awareness of the importance of conserving common moth species. The commitment and dedication of all those who have supported the light-trap network will now pay dividends in helping to conserve moth biodiversity.