

**STEWARD COMMUNITY WOODLAND -
PUBLIC MEETING &
LAUNCH OF LEGAL CHALLENGE
15th September 2016**

PUBLIC MEETING

Please come along if you can to our Public meeting taking place in Moretonhampstead Parish Hall (by the Church) on Tuesday 20th September at 7.30pm. (Please note change of venue.)

JUDICIAL REVIEW

Following the refusal last month of our Appeal for permanent planning permission for this educational project in low impact living, we have launched a legal challenge to the Decision in the High Court by way of judicial review.

The Planning Inspector ruled that the low impact dwellings and way of life damage the character and appearance of the National Park. Our case to the High Court is that the Planning Inspector wrongly interpreted the policies of the Dartmoor National Park Authority ('DNPA').

Our solicitors have told us that there is potential for overturning the Decision. We feel that this is important not only for ourselves and the project here but also because the Decision sets a really bad precedent for low impact developments generally.

The first stage is applying for leave to appeal to the High Court. This is normally done in writing without a hearing. A judge will assess whether we have a viable argument. If we lose at this stage, we will know that this avenue is a dead end and put our efforts elsewhere. If we win, we could then go on to a full hearing.

REBUTTAL OF THE INSPECTOR'S DECISION

For those interested in the detail of why we feel this Decision is fundamentally flawed, please see our Rebuttal of the Inspector's Decision [www.stewardwood.org/pdf/appeal2016-decision-response.pdf].

PETITION & MARCH

We have a petition [www.stewardwood.org/petition] for people to sign urging the DNPA to continue to allow us to live here and manage the project. There are over 4,000 signatures. Please add your name to it, if you haven't done so already.

We plan a March to the DNPA's headquarters along the route of the Wray Valley Trail to deliver this petition on Monday 3rd April 2017 during the Easter holidays.

ENFORCEMENT NOTICES

The Enforcement Notices issued by the DNPA require us to dismantle our homes, our lives and this project by August 2017 with the ultimate threat of fines and imprisonment if we stay.

After the initial shock and disbelief, we feel greatly heartened by the messages of support we have received from all quarters. We value our community, our connection to this land and the wider community even more and are drawing strength from that.

We feel determined not to allow all that we have built up over 16 years to be wrecked by the short sightedness of the DNPA and the Planning Inspector.

LARCH DISEASE

Meanwhile, our plans are developing as to how to fell the approx 300 larch trees required by the Forestry Commission before the end of March 2017 to prevent the spread of Phytophthora, a fungal disease fatal to larch.

There has never been a more important time for us to be here managing the woodland for the benefit of the ecology, with the intimate knowledge we have of this place. How can we be expected to deal with this urgent and enormous task at the same time as dismantling our homes and lives here and finding somewhere else to live?

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Here's what you can do to help:

- Sign the petition (www.stewardwood.org/petition) and spread the word about our plight through Facebook etc.
- Come along to the Public Meeting in Moretonhampstead Parish Hall (by the Church) on Tuesday 20th September at 7.30pm.
- Come on the March to the DNPA's headquarters on Monday 3rd April 2017 during the Easter holidays (details to follow).
- Phone, email, and write to the DNPA telling them why you support Steward Community Woodland and urging them to continue to allow us to live here and manage the project (see contact details below).
- If you wish to be kept informed, please join our mailing list (details on our website).
- Come and volunteer at the woods – details of Conservation Days and Volunteer Weeks are on our website and Facebook page.

Many thanks for your continued support,
Rebecca, Merlin, Ollie, Lorna, Daniel, Son, John, Sharif, Fern, Seth, Mel, and all the kids & teens

www.stewardwood.org

www.facebook.com/StewardCommunityWoodland

DNPA contact details

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Tel 01626 832093 (switchboard)

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ARTICLE BY DR TOM GREEVES IN THE WESTERN MORNING NEWS ON 18th AUGUST 2016

Woodland community shows what Dartmoor should be like –
Dismissal of the ‘green residents’ appeal is an environmental
mistake, writes **Tom Greeves**

Society progresses through innovation – in science, in arts, in rights for humans and creatures, and in how to care for the environment. But not it seems on Dartmoor: Last week a planning inspector made a decision which could lead to the eviction of 12 adults and nine children from their low-impact homes in Steward Community Woodland. This was established sixteen years ago, near Moretonhampstead.

The community, having twice been given temporary permission to continue living in the woodland, after appeals, applied to Dartmoor National Park Authority for approval of permanent residence in the woodland, which they own. The unelected Authority refused in 2015, and issued an enforcement notice. The community appealed, and the inspector, Paul Freer, has dismissed that appeal.

His report reveals a misinformed logic, a shallow understanding of landscape, and an attitude of mind that should have no place in the modern world, and certainly not within a national park.

He considers both the existing and proposed development unacceptably harms, or would harm, ‘the character and appearance of Dartmoor National Park’ and ‘the purposes of National Park designation’. Mr Freer considers the lack of a continuous tree canopy ‘erodes the character of the woodland’; permanent occupation would cause ‘irreversible erosion of the canopy cover’, despite ‘minimal’ visual impact.

Yet, for centuries, the deciduous woodlands of Dartmoor were full of human activity – by charcoal burners, bark strippers (for tanning), moss gatherers, miners, and

others, whose clearings were an integral part of Dartmoor's ancient story of woodland management. The 32 acres of Steward Community Woodland once included a farmstead – Stewardwood - and comprise numerous ancient enclosures. Field names reveal varied historic land-use: coppicing, orchards, a pond, a barn, even a possible mill, besides woodland.

The inspector's report is perhaps most flawed in respect of cultural heritage. Since the Environment Act of 1995 all national parks have a primary purpose to conserve and enhance 'natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage'. Mr Freer mentions 'natural beauty', but omits any discussion of historic or contemporary cultural heritage. Yet, in 16 years the woodland residents have added an important and cultural distinctiveness to the Wray valley.

The inspector considers the adjoining sewage works, rifle range and the A382 to be less damaging than the 'residential enclave' in the woodland, which he says is 'urbanising', 'not well integrated into the landscape', and not of 'high quality design'. Although he agrees that the community 'does broadly achieve its stated aims', with '81% of requirements met from the land', he argues that this level of self-sufficiency could not be maintained or controlled by planning conditions.

He acknowledges considerable local support but patronisingly dismisses it by balancing it against the 'national resource' of a national park and the 'understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities' – as if local people have no appreciation of this, nor play any part in it.

Mr Freer blithely states that he has been provided with no evidence to indicate that it would not be possible for residents to find accommodation in the local area within a year. He does admit that their rights under the European Convention of Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998 would be interfered with, but considers that to be justified on account of the more important 'opportunities for others to enjoy and understand the special qualities of the national park'.

A national park that cannot accommodate and celebrate the community woodland clearly needs reform. The residents' lifestyle is unusual, but is refreshing and stimulating. They have demonstrated a remarkable commitment, through winter rains and storms, to a way of life very different from most of us. They are deeply integrated with the very supportive local community. Their gentle impact on the land, philosophy and brave experiment should be celebrated, and presented as a leading example of how some of us might live in the future, supported by an innovative and flexible park authority which, since July 2013, has even introduced a policy for 'low impact residential development in the open countryside'.

The park was created in 1951 when the world population was one-third of what it is now and that of England was only 41.2 million compared to its current 54.5 million. Roger Deakin, who knew Dartmoor, wrote in *Wildwood* of a woodland community, that it was 'a practical demonstration that there is another way to live, on terms of

greater intimacy with the woods and land – slower, more deliberate and benign: a quiet assertion of greenwood values.’ The dismissal of their appeal is a denial of what Dartmoor could and should be, at a time of environmental concern.

Tom Greeves is chairman of the Dartmoor Society, cultural environmentalist and, as President of the Devonshire Association 2015-2016, author of Dartmoor & the Displacement of Culture: Analysis and Remedy.