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To Whom it May Concern,

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The National and International Value of the Steward Community Woodland to  
Education for Sustainable Development

Since 2006 Steward Community Woodland has provided an invaluable medium for students from the University of Plymouth to experience key aspects of the practical implementation of sustainable development. The encouragement of “sustainability skills” is a central tenet of the University’s Teaching and Learning Strategy, as is its incorporation into all aspects of the University’s curricula.

“Low impact”, or “minimal impact” communities such as Steward Wood enable aspects of sustainability to be experienced directly by students rather than merely by studying the idea as a theoretical concept. Furthermore, these communities are very rare examples of attempts not only to live within global environmental limitations but also to integrate all three (economic; social, and environmental) functions into human activities.

The value of these communities for the promotion of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has been recognised by the University’s Centre for Sustainable Futures (the national Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in Education for Sustainable Development funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England). In 2008 the centre awarded a fellowship to ourselves to “develop opportunities for University of Plymouth students to gain experience of, and develop research with, ‘minimal impact communities’”. Consequently Steward Wood now has regular weekend visits from student union volunteers, and visits by students as part of their studies in particular programmes. Other students are developing research dissertations which look at various effects of the community’s work. These are early days, and we anticipate a much higher degree of student involvement in

the future, including longer periods of residential study and the development of postgraduate research opportunities.

We are to present the results of the University's experiences with Steward Wood and other communities at the 5<sup>th</sup> World Environmental Education Conference in Montreal, Canada, in May of this year. Presentations discussing the potential value of such communities to ESD have already been made at two conferences in April and September of 2008 and a further paper for has been accepted for the Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (2009). Furthermore, the Stewards Wood Community, and other similar low impact communities have formed the basis of a £45,000 research proposal presently under consideration by a national research funding institution.

The learning and research potential of the Stewards Wood Community should not be underestimated. Not only does it provide the experience of such low impact living, but it provides research opportunities across the Higher Education curriculum. At a time when the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of building effective teaching and learning strategies for environmental education and education for sustainable development is increasingly discussed, Stewards Wood may very well provide an internationally important site for the resolution of such issues. No 'visitors centre' or 'educational centre' can provide for such direct learning and such very real research potential.

We have found the members of Steward Community Woodland to be dedicated and motivated in their desire to create "low impact" living and to develop an educational community that is a living example of how the principles of sustainable development can be enacted and explored. They have a low visibility on the landscape and a negligible environmental impact. At a time when there is growing recognition that human demands upon planetary resources are unsustainable we feel that the potential value of such a resource is enormous. Too often organisations state their commitment to sustainability but rarely explore how such commitments will be fully realised often resulting in contradictory policy. No better example of this is the Dartmoor National Park's Sustainability Fund which has been set up to *"encourage innovative sustainable development projects that help to improve the quality of life for current and future generations. The Fund will support proposals that focus on environmental, economic, social and cultural aspects of life."* It would seem that that the National Park perceives itself as the sole arbiter in what constitutes 'sustainability' for it disregards an extant and viable experimental sustainable community which is providing such valuable data and insight at regional, national and international levels within the academic community and beyond.

Steward Wood Community is a small group living as sustainability as possible. They are focused and committed. They have clear aims and objectives based on comprehensible principles of sustainability and ethical living. At such a time as this, when the practice of sustainable living is so vital an issue, we would wholeheartedly support the Steward Wood Community and their very genuine dedication to the future. A dedication that still might be of very real benefit us all.



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