

ECO-COMMUNITY GRANTED PLANNING PERMISSION TO CONTINUE SUSTAINABLE PROJECT IN WOODLAND

Steward Community Woodland was yesterday granted planning permission in a decision by the Planning Inspectorate which represents a significant backing to low impact development and permaculture. The Planning Inspector, Mr Brian Cook, concludes that *"the venture has evolved into one where the education resource provided by what is, in effect, a demonstration project of permaculture principles being applied in practice is of significant wider benefit."* Mr Cook also states that *"Having regard to the almost total reliance on renewable energy sources and reclaimed/reused materials I believe that the development meets many of the national policy objectives concerning sustainable development."* He granted permission for the project to continue for another 5 years (until June 2014) subject to various conditions.

Dan Thompson-Mills of the community stated *"We are delighted and thrilled that the Planning Inspector has recognised the tremendous value of this sustainable project, and considers it a worthwhile venture to continue into the future. We are relieved that the planning situation is now resolved so we can continue to live here in a low impact way and progress this educational project."*

Steward Community Woodland is a sustainable living and working project in a 32 acre mixed woodland near Moretonhampstead, within Dartmoor National Park in Devon. There are currently 12 adults and 8 children living on the site in low impact dwellings made of wood and other materials from the land along with reused/recycled materials from the land such as windows and board. They are all covered in green tarpaulin and blend into their woodland setting.

The project was established in 2000 to demonstrate low impact and permacultural solutions in the context of a woodland community to the many environmental challenges that humanity currently faces (in particular Peak Oil and climate change). After a period of permission (granted on appeal) came to an end in 2007, the community applied for another 5 year period of permission but were turned down by the Dartmoor National Park Authority. The community appealed resulting in a Public Inquiry held over 3 days at the end of April 2009.

Members of the community spend their time managing the woodland sustainably, growing organic food, maintaining their low impact dwellings and infrastructure, managing and developing their renewable energy systems, and welcoming visitors and volunteers to the project. The community lives totally off-grid, without connection to any outside services (apart from having a telephone line).

While much of their income is in the form of subsistence from the land, some members of the community currently work part-time in other ethically-based work to generate the relatively small amount of cash income needed alongside that. However, the community has developed an extensive course programme to generate the cash income they need while providing an important educational resource. The Planning Inspector states in his decision *"Mr Goldring [CEO of the permaculture Association] emphasised the value to be gained from what is in effect a working example of a permaculture system and, in my view, the increased educational role planned represents a further stage in the project."* The courses being provided cover subjects such as permaculture design, low impact living for families, off-grid renewable energy, wild food forays, and tree felling using hand tools. Some members of the community are also developing enterprises based on woodland crafts and running Forest School sessions.

The Inspector concludes that while *"it does not appear that any of the individual elements of the*

project are innovative in themselves...it is my view that the value of the project is its holistic nature.” He reports that *“Mr Goldring explained that the Community was one of the best developed and most cohesive and that a number of lessons were being learned about how it might be possible to live in and from a wood.”* He also notes that *“an independent assessment of the carbon footprint of the Community residents shows it to be about a third of the UK average.”*

The community are extremely grateful to all the support they have received from people locally and further afield.

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The Appeal Decision can be read in full on the above website.