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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

It is with considerable surprise and regret that we hear of the Dartmoor National Park's decision to again refuse permission for Steward Community Woodland to continue at its location near Moretonhampstead. Since 2006 the community has provided an invaluable medium for students from the University of Plymouth to experience and discuss 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 and in education generally.

"Low impact" or "minimal impact" communities such as Steward Wood enable aspects of sustainability to be experienced directly by students rather than merely through studying the idea as a theoretical concept. Furthermore, this community is a very rare example of attempts not only to live within global environmental limitations but also to integrate all three (economic; social, and environmental) functions into human activities. It is increasingly accepted that our environmental predicament demands new sets of values which will lead to a transformation of our personal demands upon the natural environment. There are few, if any, places where students can experience practical involvement in crucial concepts such as community based frugality, voluntary simplicity, a close working connection with nature, and a high degree of self-reliance. Steward Community Woodland is an almost unique asset in that regard.

The value of such 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 has, for many years, had regular visits from student union volunteers; students attending as part of their formal studies, and others undertaking individual research.

Our work with Steward Community Woodland has already provided important contributory data, or has been the core focus, for several academic papers and presentations. These include the following:

- Cutting, R. L., Cook, R., Di Apparano, G. & Maxey, L. (2015) *Environmental Activism and its Influence on Sustainability Education* (Manuscript in preparation for submission to the Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education)
- Cook, R. and Cutting, R. L. (2014) *'Low Impact Communities' and Their Value to Experiential Education for Sustainability in Higher Education*. Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning 14 (3) pp 247-260
- Cook, R., (2014) *Walking with the Educators: Reflections on Delivering a Masters Level Outdoor Learning Module*. Walking the Talk outdoor learning conference, Plymouth University. July 4<sup>th</sup> 2014
- Cook, R., (2013) *Education for Sustainability. Teaching Values or Recognising our Contradictions?* Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> World Environmental Education Congress 9<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> of June 2013 Marrakech, Morocco.
- Cutting, R., (2010) *Science for Sustainability. Contextualising Problem Based Learning*. Paper presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> Symposium of International Organisation for Science & Technology Educators, Bled, Slovenia.
- Waite, S., Cutting, R., Cook, R., Burnett, J., & Opie, M., (2009) *Learning Outside the Classroom: Environments for Experiential Enrichment* in Nygaard, C., Holtham, C., & Courtney, N., (Eds.) Improving Students' Learning Outcomes Denmark: Copenhagen Business School Press pp239-256
- Cook, R., & Cutting R., (2009) *If you go Down to the Woods Today... researching sustainability, sustainable development, and education for sustainable development* University of Plymouth Colleges Network Research Conference.
- Cook. R., (2009) *Living It. Some results of a research fellowship linking university students with low impact communities* 5<sup>th</sup> World Environmental Education Congress. Montreal, Canada.

- Cook, R., & Cutting, R. L., (2008) *Talking isn't doing...words are not deeds: an evaluation of the low impact Communities of the South West of England*. "All Our Futures" Conference, Centre for Sustainable Futures, University of Plymouth
- Cook, R., (2008) *Intentional Agricultural Communities. Pathfinders to Sustainability?* Rural Futures Conference. University of Plymouth, Devon.

These publications and presentations have all met with considerable interest from academics and others both nationally and internationally who have expressed great interest in the low impact communities and their value to ESD.

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.*" On this basis, it would seem that the National Park has a limited understanding of what constitutes 'sustainability' if 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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