

Message to Supporters - March 2018

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The Background

Our world is in severe crisis. Those of us around on the planet at the moment, as a result of what we are learning from science and from our own experience, are charged with beginning to turn this around. This means adopting more sustainable lifestyles. It means coming into alignment with Earth Care, People Care, and Fair Share – the three founding ethics of permaculture. This can happen and is happening in many ways. Low impact living is one of those ways.

Steward Community Woodland, the low impact living and working demonstration, has been a great success since 2000 despite the challenges of the planning administration. Thousands of visitors have gained valuable inspiration and experience over the years through working with us and learning from our courses and endeavours.

Unfortunately, due to the unfavourable outcome of our latest planning application and appeals, Enforcement Notices issued by Dartmoor National Park Authority ('the DNPA') requiring us to leave the land came into effect on 2nd December 2017. Thus, the residential aspect of the project has had to come to an end.

The Sad News

Most people have now left the land and found suitable accommodation for themselves and their families in the local area.

We are spending time settling into our new lives, while continuing to dismantle structures on site. Much of the materials have found new homes, especially at LandMatters Permaculture Project in South Devon, where the Communal Kitchen built from our own sawn larch will also be going.

The Bright Future

The good news is that Affinity Woodland Workers Co-operative still owns the woodland, so we can continue being guardians of this place with some sort of project happening here.

As we finish the process of dismantling structures and removing materials from site, we can begin to vision the future of the land and the project, creating something anew from the ashes of the old.

The history of Steward Community Woodland continues to inspire folk through, for example, the beautiful photos documenting the project and its people in the book 'Settlements' (see www.davidspero.co.uk/shop/).

What happened to our proposal to create the 'Dartmoor Roundhouse Innovation Centre' at the site?

In Autumn 2017, we put in our proposal to the DNPA for an alternative scheme based on roundhouses (entitled the 'Dartmoor Roundhouse Innovation Centre'). This addressed all the points that the Planning Inspector had made in his Decision refusing our Appeal in 2016.

The DNPA's response was totally negative (see below) and they made it clear that if we subsequently put in a planning application, the likelihood would be that they would refuse to validate the application. The only way to challenge such a decision would be to the High Court by way of judicial review (with all its expense, difficulty and uncertainty). So this effectively quashed the idea.

Despite having a low impact development policy (DMD30), it is our supposition that the DNPA actually do not wish to have any low impact development within the Park under any circumstances.

The DRIC proposal received this response at the same time that a scheme for 93 houses in a water meadow in nearby Chagford was commencing (alongside 15 retirement homes recently built and still after many months mostly vacant). This development began with the removal of huge quantities of topsoil by lorry after lorry to enable concrete foundations to be laid, and fossil fuel powered box housing to be built. There is certainly a need for affordable homes particularly for local people but this development does not provide a

solution to that in our view, nor to the huge environmental crises we currently face.

Just one indicator of many of these crises is a recent study showing that the total biomass of flying insects in the environment has decreased by 75% in the last 25 years*. Insects form the bulk of life on earth and, of course, flying insects are particularly vital for plant pollination. The results of this study are another wake up call that urgent action is needed to create radical and positive changes in the way we live our lives.

* This was based on research in Germany but experts have made it clear that the figures will be similar in the UK.

Further detail on the DNPA's position

The DNPA have done their best to scupper every project here – Steward Community Woodland, the MoreFood Community Garden (despite its lottery funding of £76,000), and now the Dartmoor Roundhouse Innovation Centre.

To show how ridiculous their position is, James Aven of the DNPA stated in their response to the Roundhouse proposal that 'in my opinion' Merlin & Rebecca's Roundhouse on site is not low impact*. This Roundhouse is constructed of a roundwood timber frame using material from Steward Wood, locally sourced straw bales and cob for insulation, and a turf roof. Numerous roundhouses of the same type have been given permission in Pembrokeshire Coast National Park under a policy which is almost identical to the DNPA's low impact development policy (DMD30).

* “In my opinion, if the structures are to be of a similar size and design as that proposed to be retained (Merlin and Beccy’s), they would not fall within the scope of

Policy DMD30.”

Despite having this low impact development policy, the DNPA have been unable to state what type of structures would be considered by them to be low impact other than benders and yurts which are generally unsuited for year round living (especially for families) because of, inter alia, their difficulty to insulate well.

George Monbiot on the National Parks

Also, see two articles by George Monbiot in the Guardian on National Parks:

www.theguardian.com/environment/georgemonbiot/2016/jan/14/swaling-is-causing-an-environmental-disaster-on-britains-moors

www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/28/britain-national-parks-reclaim-rewild

Poem 'My Gorgeous Woodland Home' by Daniel LionHeart, the Bard of Steward Wood

You are the most awesome low impact cabin ever!

Low impact, nay, you are a blessing to this place,
With your woodburning stove, your passive solar gain,
your multiplex views through reused windows, your
high level natural insulation, your resplendent eaves,
your green covering.

Why could anyone not love you?

Why could anyone not be moved by the thought, the
feeling, of living in you?

You are as much a suitable home in this place as the
bird's roost, the fox's den, the squirrel's drey.

Why do those old fogeys want to see you gone?

I built you bit by bit.
I poured my heart, my courage and my strength into
your creation
And I value you more and more each day.

How blessed am I to be living in this positively
delightful woodland dwelling, sharing its splendour with
others, providing niches for birds & bats, spiders & flies
(but thankfully not woodants or rodents this time).

If and when I come to take you down, I will shed a tear
with each screw released, with each timber prised from
the frame, with each window & door removed.

What folly there is in this world of ours.

I look forward to my children, your children, our
children finding their place on this globe, discovering
their beautiful connection to all that is – as I have.

We have the power
We have the love
We have the knowledge
And we can be free

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