



President  
Roger Martin

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Paul Bryan

Please reply to:-  
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Honor Clark  
Deputy County Solicitor  
Legal Services  
County Hall  
Taunton  
Somerset  
TA1 4DY

22<sup>th</sup> December 2011

Dear Ms Clark

#### **DISPOSAL OF COUNTY COUNCIL LAND AT GREAT WOOD - Ref: CNV0038/1/JAH**

I am writing to object to the proposed disposal of County Council owned land on the Quantock Hills on behalf of the West Somerset group of the Campaign to Protect Rural England - Somerset, which covers the whole of the Quantock Hills AONB as CPRE-Somerset does not have a Sedgemoor group.

I list the reasons for my objection below:

#### Access

While all the land has open access on foot, either as open access land, common land or, in the case of Great Wood, by dedication, this does not ensure the continuation of access for horse riders or cyclists, other than on statutory bridleways, should this land pass into private ownership. The Quantocks are well used by both groups, who have ridden widely over these areas in the past and indeed Great Wood has been promoted for cycling and is valuable for taking pressure off the open hill. All this could change if the land was purchased by an unsympathetic private individual.

#### Land management

The common land is, I understand, in Countryside Stewardship agreements, which provide resources to undertake management to an agreed plan to benefit wildlife, landscape and cultural heritage. However these agreements are due to come to an end shortly and negotiations to transfer the areas to Higher Level Stewardship are, I believe, underway. Agri-environment agreements are always difficult to agree over common land and the landowner can be crucial in taking a coordinating role. This is a very bad moment to bring

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a new, unknown owner into the equation, who may have different aspirations for the land, which could conflict with those of the commoners. The fact that the land is designated as an SSSI does not ensure that positive management will continue, even though I am sure that Natural England would do their best to encourage it. An unsympathetic owner could jeopardise all that has been achieved over the last few years.

The Great Wood is currently managed by the Forestry Commission, so management is not a drain on SCC resources and brings in a small rent. It seems unlikely that a private individual would wish to buy this area, except for the shooting rights, which I understand SCC holds. The wood and adjoining open land could be very suitable for commercial shooting and the prospect of a shoot in this area is horrifying. You have only got to look at Exmoor to see the conflicts caused by shooting in a well visited area. Furthermore a new owner developing a shoot would wish to constrain all forms of access, putting pressure on the Forestry Commission to restrict the promotion of the area to the public, as happens on other parts of the public Forest Estate, where shooting rights are not in hand. Despite the dedicated access on foot the area would not be the pleasant, tranquil area that people now love. The noise of shooting could be heard several days a week from October to end of January, and all the paraphernalia of a shoot - release pens, feed hoppers, gun stands etc would destroy the wild feel of the woodland throughout the year. The likely impact can be experienced at the northern end of the Quantocks, where a shoot has been recently established.

The areas of land form key parts of the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and all public bodies have a duty under section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to have regard, in carrying out all its functions, to the purpose of the AONB - to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area. Furthermore the council is also obliged under Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 to have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity, the sale of land of high biodiversity value without ensuring its continuing management for wildlife conflicts with this. For the reasons above the council is failing to meet its legal obligations if it sells this land without very significant covenants. Such covenants are likely to reduce the value of the land substantially or indeed possibly make it unsalable. This calls the validity of the whole exercise into question, and suggests the council should consider the wider benefits of this land.

In the 1920s the County Council had the far-sighted vision to appreciate what a wonderful resource the Great Wood and adjoining land would be for the people of Somerset. In the present day the need for places such as this, where people can escape the pressures of modern life, is greater still. The recent work on the value of ecosystem services has demonstrated that being able to access the countryside, to enjoy the peace, tranquility and opportunity for exercise and recreation, has a huge impact on health and wellbeing. It is very sad that the current council has such a limited view of the value of these very special places and sees them only as a resource to be plundered.

I object very strongly to the proposed sale of county council owned land within the Quantock Hills AONB and urge Somerset County Council to reconsider this decision.

Yours sincerely

**David Lloyd**

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