THE OLD SAWMILL TEAROOM
Summary
This practice note highlights the value of harnessing the attraction created by wildlife, in this case Ospreys, to sustain a thriving business. The Ospreys attract between 70 000 to 80 000 visitors a year to a viewing point which in turn generates between 30 000 and 35 000 thousand visitors to a tea room. The tea room in turn generates 1 full time and 10 part time jobs along with increased production for locally sourced produce for sale.

Site Description
Located approximately 5km North of Keswick on the A591
The Old Sawmill Tearoom is situated on land owned by Mirehouse Estate at the entrance to Dodd Wood; 300ha of woodland is leased from the estate by Forest Enterprise (FE).
Whilst run separately, the tearoom is an intrinsic part of Mirehouse house and gardens, which are open to the general public and utilise the car park and toilet facilities adjacent to the tearoom. The predominantly coniferous woodland to the east is open to public access and contains some 7 miles of way marked permissive footpaths. Whilst not unique, the setting and co-operation between Mirehouse and the FE has resulted in a visitor attraction that appeals to a very wide range of people thus increasing potential custom for the tearoom.

History & Business Development
The building in which the tearoom is housed was originally a water-powered estate sawmill dating back to the 1880s. Following closure of the mill in the 1970s, the building remained empty for around 8 years when Mirehouse took the initiative to develop the tearoom in response to increased visitor numbers to the house and gardens which had neither refreshment or toilet facilities available at the time.
Additionally, at around the same time, the FE opened many of its woodlands for public access and this included Dodd Wood.
Co-operation between Mirehouse and the FE resulted in extended car park facilities and building of a toilet block.
The tearoom served as a central point for Mirehouse estate selling entry tickets to the house as well as providing refreshments and toilet facilities. This also suited the FE who were expanding the permissive public access in many of their woodlands. Revenue raised from parking was used for upkeep of the toilets and car park with profit being split between the estate and the FE.
The tearoom is currently run as a partnership between the estate and the manageress. This amicable agreement ensures both parties are able to influence and maintain the quality of service and food, all of which is locally produced or home made. Currently they are able to cater for approximately 50 people at a time with seating both inside and out.
The early part of 2001 saw a dramatic downturn in visitor numbers due to foot and mouth, however success by the RSPB, LDNPA and the FE in encouraging breeding Ospreys onto the opposite side of Bassenthwaite lake ensured custom for the car park and tearoom as official viewing areas were opened within Dodd Wood.
Whilst it is not possible to give exact numbers of visitors to the tearoom, (as the car park is
shared) Mirehouse receives around 21 thousand visitors per year of which perhaps half will utilise the facilities. The FE estimate some 70-80 thousand visitors to Dodd Wood for recreation and Osprey watching; even if one third of these visited the tearoom, combined figures of 30-35 thousand customers per year are probably on the conservative side (this does not include cyclists using the A591 or walkers gaining access to Skiddaw).

**Employment**
The tearoom is open from April to October and during this period employs the manageress full time and up to 10 people part time with a minimum of four staff on any one day. In addition the tearoom caters for the function room at the house though bookings must be taken well in advance particularly during the height of summer to allow extra staff to be drafted in. Consideration was given to opening the tearoom all year round; however an initial trial period proved unsuccessful with visitor numbers declining steeply after October.

**Advertising**
Whilst there is little advertising directly associated with the tearoom, there is considerable advertising for the house and gardens through web sites, historic house guides, leaflets at guest houses and tourist information centres, as well as through the FE. Mirehouse was noted as one of the 1000 best houses to visit in the Sunday Times and in 1999 won the National Heritage award for “Best historic house for families”. The tearoom acts as the ticket office for the house and gardens, and parking and toilet facilities are located adjacent to the tearoom. This undoubtedly has a positive influence on custom, without the need for expenditure. Additionally the FE also advertises Osprey watching at Dodd Wood. All aspects of the visitor attractions are also well signed from the public roads.

**Planning**
As the tearoom was an existing building there were no problems associated with planning or conversion from the sawmill.

**Grants**
To date the estate have contributed towards all capital costs for conversion of the building and shared with the FE the costs of extending the car parks and construction of the toilets. The owners would like to extend the kitchen facilities to accommodate the increased custom. However this would be dependent on availability of a grant to help offset some of the cost.

**Future Proposals**
There is no intention to increase the capacity of the tearoom other than the kitchen mentioned above. However in conjunction with the FE, proposals are in place to renew and extend the toilet block as this is now barely able to cope with the volume of visitors to the area.

Mirehouse produce a small quarterly leaflet “Nature Notes” promoting the role and management of woodlands within the area. The FE also promote these aspects through visitor centres and active involvement with the public. The owners of the tearoom are interested in developing further public awareness of woodland management practices, the importance of timber as a renewable resource and the multi-functional role of forests and woodlands through education and involvement of visitors to the area.

**Conclusion**
Key to the success of the Old Sawmill Tearoom is primarily its location in respect to other visitor attractions namely Mirehouse Estate, Dodd Wood and, fortuitously, the Ospreys. This however only brings people to the area and it is the responsibility of the tearoom to ensure that the quality of food and efficiency of the staff is maintained to retain and increase custom. By running the business as a partnership as opposed to a franchise it is possible to monitor and maintain the quality of food and service, and by using locally produced food and locally employed staff it is possible to react quickly to changes in circumstances.

This model would not be transferable to all locations; however where there are already suitable visitor attractions or where such attractions can be created there would undoubtedly be scope for provision of quality refreshments.