This practice note illustrates how a chalet business in northern Cumbria positively harnesses woodlands and the natural environment to achieve commercial success. The business has generated 2 full time and 3 part time jobs with plans for a further post along with knock on benefits for other enterprises in the surrounding rural community.

The Tranquil Otter has achieved 92% occupancy rates for high-end self-catering accommodation, double the average rate for Cumbria with rentals of between £420 and £720 per week. This has been achieved by focusing on a quality visitor experience combined with attractive brochures and careful marketing.

Site Description
Located 5km east of Carlisle, The Tranquil Otter is a private nature reserve dominated by an 18 acre lake with 12 acres of reed and wetland habitat surrounded by 20 acres of predominantly broadleaved woodland. Commercially the woodlands could not be considered as particularly productive. Much of the area is seasonally wet and is suitable only for the willow that naturally occurs along the lake margins. Where the water table is lower the main tree species are alder, oak, ash, birch and beech of varying ages with a scrub layer of naturally regenerated broadleaves, shrubs, holly and yew combining to produce a wild natural feel that is ideal to promote a sense of solitude.

Within the woodland area 2.5km of surfaced paths (to wheelchair access standard) wind their way amongst the trees over bridges and raised boardwalks in a circular walk around the lake visiting a variety of habitats.

Due to the nature of the land, woodland management access is difficult and in some areas removal of timber and produce is almost impossible.

History & Business Development
The current owners purchased the site, as a going concern, in 1998 and with it six wooden chalets built in the early 1980s, an office of similar construction, a bird hide overlooking the lake and the main brick built dwelling house. The existing business was primarily aimed at fishing holidays on the lake and the sale of day fishing permits, combined these made up around 80% of the turnover.

During 1999 four of the chalets were comprehensively upgraded to include central heating and the kitchens and bathrooms were refitted. Two were demolished, and new larger chalets built fully equipped with wheelchair access facilities. A final luxury chalet was completed during 2002; this too was made fully wheelchair accessible and includes an outside hot tub. In combination, the chalets can accommodate up to 30 people however the emphasis is very much on quality and not quantity.

The office now includes a small shop catering for basic food and household requirements. Since taking over the business the occupancy rate has more than doubled and the chalets are frequently let over the winter months. Whilst fishing is still
available and the lake stocked with rainbow trout, day fishing permits are no longer sold and those coming purely to fish make up only 20% of the chalet occupancy. Over 70% of the occupancy is by return visit or word of mouth.

Planning
At the time of purchase outline planning permission existed for up to 15 chalets. No objections were raised to the proposed increase in size of the new chalets. Whilst each scheme will be assessed on its merits, discussion with local planners indicates that generally planners appear sympathetic to tourist development within woodlands particularly where the style of building and materials used are in keeping with the setting.

Advertising
The owners have taken a very positive approach to advertising, and initially invested several thousand pounds in the production of high quality brochures and literature; this alone increased bookings by over 14%. In addition, advertising in selected publications, Internet advertising and production of a web site (www.thetranquilotter.co.uk) has also seen increased bookings. The approach has proved very successful, with the lodges being fully booked from April to October and around 50% occupancy through the remaining months.

Employment
The business employs both of the owners full time, in addition there are three part time staff who assist with cleaning and maintenance of the chalets and site, and a further appointment is proposed to assist with office work. Shops, pubs and facilities also benefit from The Tranquil Otters clients and the owners have developed partnerships with local businesses giving discounts and special offers to visitors staying in the chalets. These range from discounted micro light flights at Carlisle Airport, hawk walks with The Bird of Prey Centre and massages and other beauty treatments at The Retreat Health and Beauty Salon.

Grants
All work on the chalets and site has been undertaken with private finances. A Forestry Commission grant exists for minor management works but little else, though there are proposals to look at aid from Forest Futures.

Future proposals
Currently the owners do not wish to increase the number of chalets on site but wish to add value by concentrating on developing and enhancing the visitor experience. Proposals include restoration works on the lake in conjunction with English Nature, sympathetic woodland habitat management particularly for red squirrels, repairs and upgrading of some of the paths, information leaflets for the woodland walks, rustic site furniture, and possibly a small sculpture trail. Further web site development is also proposed.

Conclusion
The Tranquil Otter is an excellent example of using woodlands for rural development. Mr and Mrs Wise have achieved a great deal in four years, increasing substantially the rates of occupancy and business turnover. This has been achieved through hard work, targeted advertising and attention to quality, not only in the chalets but also for the visitor experience. The woodlands play an extremely important role in the business, screening the chalet development and providing a recreational resource with many habitats and conservation features. Perhaps the most important role is that of creating the feeling of solitude and tranquillity, producing an ideal setting that complements the lake.

It is believed that this model would be transferable to many woodlands (even without a lake) as long as the attributes of the location, as achieved at The Tranquil Otter, are maximised.