

# Significance of the root issues

A tribute to trees and the diverse nature of their impact on our lives is no revelation to Jules Pretty



**The Global Forest: 40 Ways Trees Can Save Us**  
By Diana Beresford-Kroeger  
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Above the broiling heat of the lowest place in the Americas are the planet's oldest trees. From the floor of Death Valley, as it has come to be known, you would not know that the high chaparral of the slopes of the Panamint Range are so special. But above the main tree line, where stands of pinyon pine and mountain mahogany have long provided cool cathedrals for the Timbisha people, you will find these gnarled and grised ancients. They are bristlecone pines; striated and rusty individuals up to 5,000 years old. Each has seen off 200 human generations. This is reason enough, it seems to me, to treat trees with respect.

Diana Beresford-Kroeger sets out to tell 40 stories about trees, grouped together in her imagined global forest. These tales range across ecology, myth, horticulture, spirituality and medicine in an effort to explain their significance to us.

This should be interesting territory: trees are, after all, important to almost all cultures worldwide. For many, the tree is the axis mundi, linking higher and lower places. Trees are a source of shelter, timber, food, medicine and fodder. Trees have spoken: in Persia, one rebuked Alexander the Great and prophesied his death in a country far from home. There has been a tree of enlightenment for Buddha, a tree of knowledge for Krishna, and world trees, such as Yggdrasil, which defined Odin's hold over Scandinavia. But you will have to look elsewhere if such symbolism is of interest.

These essays should, by their

titles, amount at least to a reveal. Flowery language may be acceptable, but not casual error. "The English forests were carefully cut on a 7-year cycle that was sustainable in a mild, almost frost-free climate," Beresford-Kroeger observes. But coppicing cycles varied according to places and tree-mix, and even in the medieval warm epoch, winters were never frost-free.

Elsewhere, we are told that acorns were eaten as a vegetable, and the hedgerow is seen wherever there is agriculture. Even here in England we know this is not true, let alone in the agricultures of central Asia to tropical Africa. "If a child believes in trees," says the author, "then they believe in fairies." And then we are subjected to a Tinkerbell-like description of fairies with no hint of the terrible, revengeful fairies of myth of many indigenous peoples.

The concept of the sacred is important for sustainability: we will only conserve something if it is important to us. And this is defined not just by utility, but by imagination and meaning. Trees have long been part of our sacred ecosystems. I was surprised, therefore, to see no mention of three of the best books on the sacred nature of trees: Eugene Anderson's *Ecologies of the Heart: Emotion, Belief and the Environment* (1996), Fikret Berkes' *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management* (1999) and Roger Cook's 1974 classic *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos*.

In many places it is particular individuals that receive our attention. All over England, places are immortalised by their famous trees. Sue Clifford and Angela King's inspired *England in Particular: A Celebration of the Commonplace, the Local, the Vernacular and the Distinctive* (2006) tells us stories of oak, elm, ash and poplar, and how they shape our sense of place.

William Cowper wrote "time made thee what thou wast/king of the woods". And this is why we mourn their loss – not today from cutting and burning, as in the Amazon, but from diseases and pests. Dutch elm disease eliminated 20 million grand elms from the English landscape, leaving it almost only a hedgerow plant today. Leaf

miners burn off horse chestnuts, and *Phytophthora* threatens both alder and oak.

This book has a simple and important message: trees are important, we should look after them more, cut them down less, conserve their habitats, revere them more. But you knew that anyway.

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