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Opinion

The Guardian view on the cultural life of trees: we must protect our natural heritage

Editorial

From Shakespeare to Radiohead, ancient woodlands have shaped the UK's creative landscape. They deserve to be celebrated

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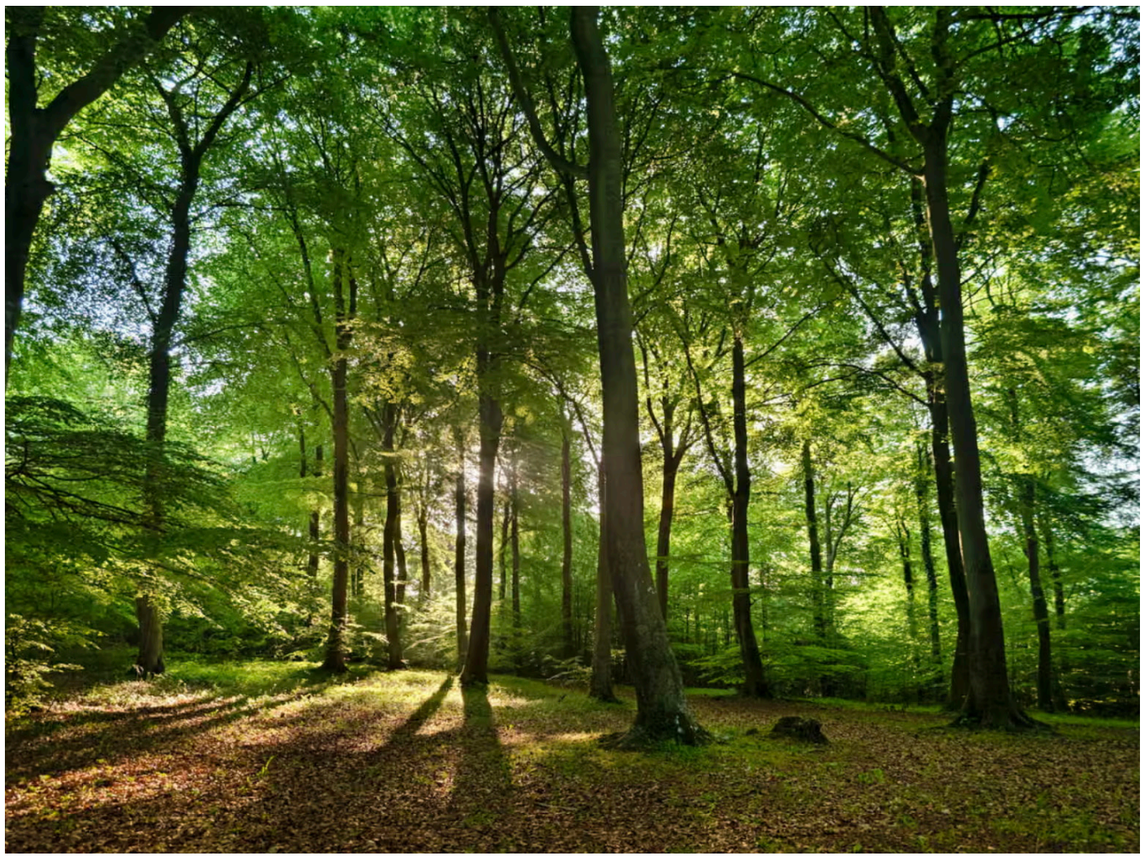

If the mindless felling of the Sycamore Gap tree has taught us anything, it is that there is no such thing as "just a tree", as one of the perpetrators, Adam Carruthers, told the jury. "It was almost as if someone had been murdered," he said of the ensuing public outcry. For many it was.

Animism runs deeply through our relationship with arboreal life. From Macbeth's prophetic Birnam Wood to the towering Ents in The Lord of the Rings, trees have long been personified in literature. And, from Constable's bucolic Suffolk to David Hockney's Yorkshire wold, they have helped shape Britain's artistic landscape.

This cultural heritage is being celebrated by the Woodland Trust UK Tree of the Year 2025. The Sycamore Gap tree won in 2016. The shortlist, announced this week, brings together William Wordsworth and the Beatles, Virginia Woolf and Radiohead, all united by the trees they have helped put on the UK's cultural map. The Tree of Peace and Unity in County Antrim, where the Good Friday agreement was signed in 1998, also makes the list of 10 culturally remarkable trees.

British history is written in its trees: the ancient Ankerwycke Yew at Runnymede, where Henry VIII is rumoured to have courted Anne Boleyn; the Royal Oak in Shropshire, which hid the future Charles II; and the Tolpuddle Martyrs Tree in Dorset.

Like the rings in their trunks, over centuries trees become the keeper of stories. They also, of course, provide paper on which to read them. This is ingeniously encapsulated in The Future Library by the Scottish conceptual artist Katie Paterson. Starting with Margaret Atwood in 2014, each year a manuscript by a different novelist is buried in Oslo's Nordmarka forest. In 2114, 100 books will be published out of the 1,000 specially planted pine trees.

In fairytales and crime fiction, forests signal danger, but they are also places of sanctuary and renewal, hence the ancient Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku* or forest bathing. Peter Rabbit finds safety in a burrow at the bottom of a tree. They also promise adventure and character-building, as in Robin Hood and the ethos behind Scandinavian forest schools.

We learn to anthropomorphise arboreal beings from an early age: Enid Blyton's Magic Faraway Tree and JK Rowling's Whomping Willow are characters in their own right. Trees have very human qualities: they can learn from past traumas, such as droughts, and they make good "parents", allowing their seedlings just the right amount of sugar through their roots.

But they cannot protect them from global heating and disease. New research has revealed that saplings in British woodlands have been dying at an alarming rate since 2000. As much as 70% of ancient woods in the UK have been lost or damaged in the last 100 years. After the destruction of the Sycamore Gap tree, and the 500-year old oak in Enfield near a Toby Carvery restaurant this year, the government has set out much-needed plans to give legal protection to older and culturally important trees in England.

Our ancient woodlands are irreplaceable. We must protect them as they protect us. As Woodland Trust patron Judi Dench put it, our oldest trees "are as much part of our heritage as any literature". They should be cherished and celebrated. In the words of WH Auden: "A culture is no better than its woods."