

# Why we need a better philosophy of trees

November 7 2017, by Tristan Moyle

---



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

On November 6 1217, Henry III's [Charter of the Forest](#) gave ordinary English people back their traditional rights to use royal hunting grounds for livestock grazing and collecting firewood. The freedoms that were restored in the use of ancient woodland reshaped the community's legal and political relationship with nature. But, today, this relationship has broken down. Only [2%](#) of the UK's ancient woodland survives; over half has been destroyed since the 1930s. Only [13%](#) of the UK is covered with

trees, compared to the European average of 37%. And so exactly 800 years on, in Lincoln Castle, home of the original charter, a new [Charter for Trees, Woods and People](#) has been launched by the Woodland Trust.

The purpose of the new charter is to set out "the principles by which [trees](#) and people in the UK can stand together". In the face of [problems](#) such as low planting rates, inconsistent management, threats from housing and infrastructure developments, the desire is to "build a people-powered movement for trees" and to "demonstrate the important role that trees play in people's lives". The principles of the charter include the protection of irreplaceable trees and woods, the creation of transport networks for wildlife, the strengthening of habitats with trees and the development of an action plan to harness their [health benefits](#). Its purpose is to serve as a unified "rallying cry" for disparate voices and organisations, and so to bring the plight of trees and woodlands to national consciousness, in a particularly cogent way.

So why is such a charter needed? Writing as a philosopher, and reflecting on the history of my subject, it does give pause for thought: trees, and plants generally, have simply not garnered attention in the way that humans, and more recently, non-human animals have. It's as if Socrates' [remark](#) that "the trees teach me nothing" is very much still the attitude today.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Exciting work in botany is revealing the [extraordinary capacities](#) of plants: for memory, for communication, for tracking environmental features and even – perhaps – for discrimination between self and non-self. Any philosopher interested in the intelligence or psychological capacities of animals, human or otherwise, needs to be able to situate their work in relation to these [newly discovered capacities](#).

Take the complex, often vast, symbiotic relation between common fungi

and the roots of forest trees, dubbed the "[wood wide web](#)". Here, organisms have formed a mutually beneficial connection for the purpose of exchanging nutrients or even, in the case of trees, distributing resources. If we want to know about the nature of intelligence, or what a species is, or whether an entity such as a forest is a super-organism, attending to the lives of trees can teach us a lot.

## Beheading wildflowers

To be fair to Socrates, when he says that "only the people in the city" can teach him, what he means is that it is only by speaking to and interacting with others, within the walls of the city-state, that we can learn how to be good. But, again, he's wrong. We live among trees and how we interact with them, as well as the degree of our sensitivity to them, has moral significance.

Imagine a person gleefully beheading wildflowers by the roadside or cutting down an oak in their garden for the sheer pleasure of it. Many of us would that say these [actions are wrong](#). Why? It's not as if another person has been harmed because their property rights have been violated. If we assume that trees lack sentience, then it isn't right to say that the actions are cruel, because cruelty presupposes a being that can suffer.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Kant [condemns](#) the wilful destruction of nature because he thinks such actions inculcate bad habits. He argues that we have an indirect duty to treat animals well, for example, because a person who is cruel to animals will often end up being cruel to human beings, to whom we owe direct duties. Likewise, we have indirect duties to inanimate nature – Kant lumps together beautiful crystal formations with the beauty of plants – because respecting their intrinsic, aesthetic value helps instil in us the habit to treat each other well. So, although Kant does deal with humanity's relationship with nature, he only does so in terms of how this relationship benefits human beings and their social interactions.

## **Beyond natural capital**

So what is the dominant philosophical conception of nature now?

The new charter appears largely to reflect this Kantian approach to nature, at least in broad terms. It draws our attention, rightly, to all the benefits of trees in our lives and in the lives of other sentient creatures: habitats resilient to climate change, opportunities for education, cultural enrichment, health benefits, the list goes on.

The danger is that this human-centric approach slides inexorably into an increasingly popular [natural capital](#) mode of valuation, in which trees and woodlands are conceived first and foremost as "assets" that provide vital "ecosystem services". It is this language, borrowed from economics, that, for example, frames the [Independent Panel of Forestry](#) report, published in 2011 to advise the government on the future direction of forestry and woodland policy in England.

The philosopher in me would like to point out that we ought to value trees for their own sake and not simply for the benefits or "services" they provide to human beings (or another forms of sentient life). However, in a time of environmental devastation, any reason to protect trees and woodlands is a good reason. In any case, the two are not mutually exclusive. We can, without contradiction, value nature for its own sake and also for the sake of its benefits.

But there is, perhaps, a special role for philosophers in banging on about the former, even as we need the latter approach to get government to listen. It used to be thought that the only thing that mattered morally was a capacity to reason. Then, in the 19th century, the British utilitarians [showed](#) that an animal's capacity to suffer meant that we also owed the animals moral consideration. Now, it seems, the sheer fact that a thing is alive is of moral importance.

It may be that value attaches to an organism's ability to develop all of its

natural, biological capacities, [as biocentrists think](#). Or it may be that we attach value to entities that display certain kinds of animate, bodily movement, [as I have argued](#). In any case, trees are special, wonderful organisms and the Charter for Trees, Woods and People does a great service in drawing their silent, mysterious lives to our attention.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Why we need a better philosophy of trees (2017, November 7) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-11-philosophy-trees.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--