

'Killing' trees: How true environmental protection requires a revolution in how we talk about, and with, our forests

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Which came first, the acorn or the oak? A more important question is which came first: our words for trees, or our understandings of what

trees are?

Human discourse around [trees](#) both shapes and is shaped by our education, beliefs, experience and relationships with trees. Simply put, how we speak about trees matters.

Ten years ago, I appreciated trees alongside concern for the health of our planet, but did not consider the ways we speak about trees or their profound intricacies. Then, through an unexpected turn in [my research](#), I became more aware of trees' [relationships, sentience, intelligence and interconnections with their environments as home and community](#).

As we near the anniversary of last year's UN Convention on Biological Diversity in Montréal, it is apparent that our collective tree discourse needs to fundamentally shift in order to reconnect with the integrity, interconnectivity and protection of all ecosystems called for in the [Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework](#).

Such a shift and lasting change means we must not talk about trees, but *with* trees.

What is tree discourse?

Behind all discourse are systems of [language, behavior and belief](#). Contemporary discourse reflects and shapes people's belief that trees are living community members or inanimate materials to be used for human well-being.

This binary gets complicated when people understand the aliveness of trees and their relations with non-human life while prioritizing human economic value and need of trees.

Western relationships with trees have evolved from [knowing trees and](#)

[plants as persons, kin and divine](#) to viewing the natural world as separate and subject to the will of human desires. During the European Enlightenment, English philosopher John Stuart Mill stated that [following nature "is equally irrational and immoral" because useful human action "improves the spontaneous course of nature" and imitating nature would be vile.](#)

This paradigm, which has dominated western, and by extension global, thought for centuries, considers trees and plants as ["just life's wallpaper"](#) and resources to be exploited.

Impacts of tree discourse

English writer John Evelyn's foundational text [Sylva](#) was published in 1664 and became one of the most influential books on forestry.

Conceived as a practical guide to sylvia culture—the science of growing and harvesting trees for products—the book was written in response to the English Royal Navy's concerns of timber shortages. As many as [2,000 oak trees were needed](#) to construct a single navy ship in the 17th century, and England's forests were being decimated.

These same wooden ships carried the imperial and colonial expansion which brought untold [genocide and ecocide to the Americas \(Turtle Island\)](#) which was extensive enough to [result in a global "little ice age."](#)

The felling of 2,000 oak trees to build a single ship was normalized through the embedded and convenient belief that humans can behave as the dominant species on Earth and exploit trees and other non-humans in the name of progress. Likewise, the continued deforestation we see all around us—loss on the scale of [10 million hectares per year since 2010](#) alone—is enabled through the same ideological discourse.

Effects of deforestation include [loss of non-human species, reduced ability of trees to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and increases in droughts, fires and heat, all of which inhibit plant and tree growth and contribute to the climate crisis.](#)

Additionally, the loss of [old, venerable and ancient trees.](#) in pursuit of good views, new farms or solar panel installations, impacts eco-communities living within them as well as other communities of trees, non-humans and humans.

In many Indigenous and animist ways of knowing, non-humans, including trees, are [people and relatives.](#)

Referred to as ["the Standing People" they are honored and respected for their unique tangible and intangible qualities.](#) Relationships with trees are recognized through gestures of gratitude and reciprocity such as offerings and prayers. In many Indigenous worldviews, [recognizing and respecting the intelligence and equality within living environments is essential to guiding responsible companionship with the world and to protecting all life.](#)

Celebration and change

Over the past 10 years or so there has been an increase in western literary and media publications about trees. Trees [have served humankind practically and as valuable sources of symbolism and creativity.](#)

Trees [protect urban centers and reduce their expenses,](#) they [interact biologically and socially](#) and they live and procreate via [exquisite, tiny biological parts.](#)

Western tree discourse is increasingly recognizing trees as beings in their

own right. Scientific research shows evidence of tree and plant [self-awareness](#), [intelligence](#), [perception](#), and [cognition](#).

The ongoing controversy around plant intelligence links to the perception that ["intelligence" cannot apply to organisms lacking organs responsible for intelligent functioning](#), or [movement](#).

Conversely, renowned Italian botanist and scholar Stefano Mancuso argues that it is impossible and evolutionarily unrealistic to consider any form of life as lacking intelligence. This includes ["plants, which being unable to move, must necessarily solve their problems."](#)

Changes in academic thinking over the past few decades toward decentering humans and concern for non-humans, known as [the nonhuman turn](#), and the growing field of [critical plant studies](#) are bringing academic and [public attention](#) to non-humans and [plants as aware and active in their own lives and worlds](#). This attention [must include recognition that Indigenous relational knowledge with non-human intelligence and personhood existed long before the emergence of western modes of thought](#).

In 1972, American legal and environmental scholar [Christopher Stone](#) called for the rights and moral standing of trees, stating it is [neither inevitable nor wise that beings of nature should have no rights, standing or voice](#) in human society.

Rather than assume and impose that non-humans have no voice, we humans need to recognize the limitations in our capacity to listen. Discourse is not only human.

Trees matter

In September 2023, a 300-year-old iconic sycamore tree in England, that

had [become "part of this area's DNA," was "literally murdered," an act that was "like stealing joy."](#)

This type of discourse reflects the sense of security and identity which people develop over a long period of relations with trees and the natural world. These words reflect respect for trees' ineffable presence and [healing qualities](#), their inherent aliveness, their right to recognition as sentient beings, and the support trees give for all life on Earth.

Hearing people describe trees as "relations" and "murdered"—and understanding *why* they do so—helps shift understandings and perspectives of trees. People are increasingly aware of the need to interact with trees with respect, mindfulness and care.

Alongside recounting such descriptive words in media stories, journalists can critically widen tree discourse by detailing people's understandings of trees. Shifting tree discourse imperatively informs action toward ecological integrity.

Collectively, efforts toward embedding trees as relations and persons into western worldviews can help us relearn and reconnect with [the old ways of knowing and being with trees, and all non-humans, in interrelation and kinship to create a vitally different future.](#)

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