

Trees Outside of Woodland

An exploration of social and cultural values

Despite making up almost one fifth of the tree cover in Great Britain, trees outside of woodland (ToW), particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, remain an understudied part of the treescape¹.

Culture and heritage

Culture and heritage deeply influence the values people associate with ToW, seen in symbolism, mythology, and inspiration for art forms. Rituals, aesthetics, and indigenous practices represent cultural identities and conn with trees' spiritual significance. Language, urban environments, and cultural exchange further enhance the relationship between nature, cultur and human expression. In urban areas trees symbolise green spaces and community unity, showcased in murals and sculptures and central to loca ceremonies and festivals, symbolise shared identity and cultural cohesion. This convergence of cultural perspectives on trees results from global interactions, creating a blend of artistic expressions.

“Trees are the earth’s endless effort to speak to the listening heaven.”

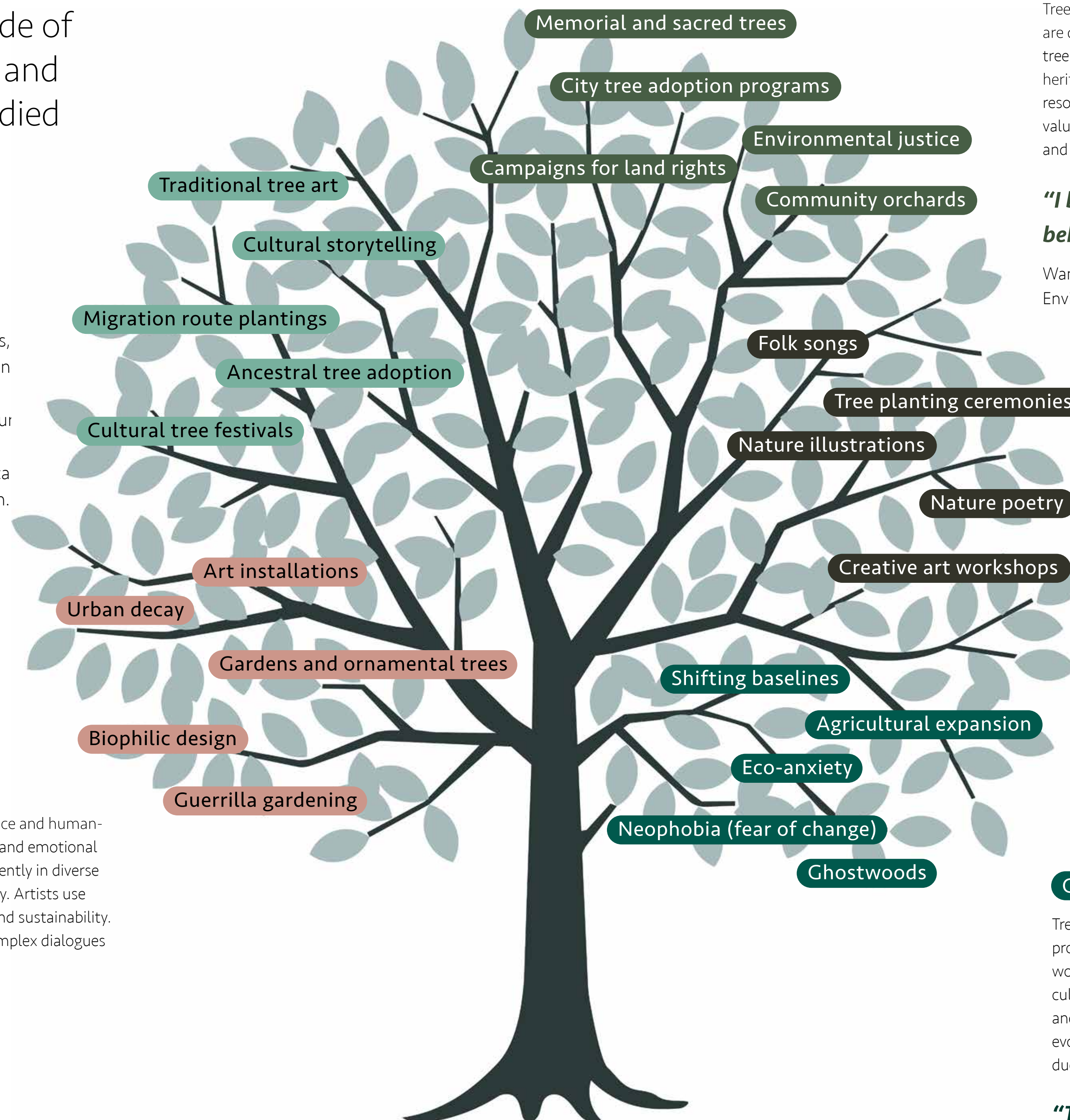
Rabindranath Tagore.
Poet and cultural icon.

Landscape aesthetics

Trees affected by urban decay or environmental stress, inspire reflection on resilience and human-made landscapes. Biophilic design in education emphasizes creativity, restoration, and emotional connections, enhancing well-being and learning experiences. Trees feature prominently in diverse art forms, with modern installations urging viewers to reconsider notions of beauty. Artists use unconventional aesthetics to prompt discussions on environmental degradation and sustainability. This interaction between aesthetics and cultural values provides a platform for complex dialogues about nature, aesthetics, and human environmental impact.

“Every artist dips his brush in his soul, and paints his own nature into his pictures.”

Henry Ward Beecher.
Clergyman, social reformer, and speaker.



Ownership and belonging

Trees on public and private land convey different senses of ownership and care, influencing how they are depicted in art and how society views them. The negotiation of ownership for culturally significant trees, like those tied to indigenous heritage or historical sites, prompts discussions about identity, heritage, and shared memory. Artistic expressions reflect broader conversations about access to natural resources and preserving cultural landscapes. This intersection of ownership, belonging, and cultural values in art provides a dynamic platform to explore the connections between human societies, trees, and their environments.

“I believe that every tree has a story to tell, and its ownership and belonging are woven into the tapestry of our shared human experience.”

Wangari Maathai.
Environmentalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

Community and folk traditions

Community and folk traditions, including stories, songs, and celebrations, strengthen the bond between people and their natural surroundings. Trees hold a significant place in communal practices and folklore, symbolising shared identity and continuity across generations. These traditions inspire various artistic expressions, showcasing the deep connections between people and trees and preserving local knowledge. This cultural interweaving highlights the reciprocal relationship between nature, culture, and artistic creativity. Thus, community-driven values and folk traditions underscore the role of arts and humanities in depicting the synergy between trees, human societies, and their shared cultural heritage.

“In every grove and forest, the past comes back to life. Its wreckage is preserved in parks and nature reserves. People who swim in brooks or watch new leaves sprouting on a tree trunk are dipping into the past and the future at once.”

Kathleen Jamie.
Poet and writer.

Change, loss and wellbeing

Trees that bear witness to urbanisation, climate shifts, or deforestation become powerful symbols, prompting contemplation of impermanence and human impacts on the environment. Artists respond with works that blend nostalgia and calls for environmental stewardship. The intricate ties between nature, culture, and societal shifts are explored through literature, visual arts, and performance. Urban development and deforestation reshape human connections to the environment, while ghostwoods and tree remnants evoke vanishing natural landscapes. Solastalgia and eco-anxiety arise from the loss of cherished green spaces due to urbanisation and climate change, heightening concerns for the planet's future.

“There is an urgent need for further research into the emotional impact of climate change on children and young people and for governments to validate their distress by taking urgent action on climate change.”

Caroline Hickman.
Climate Psychotherapist.

¹ https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/fr_tree_cover_outside_woodland_in_gb_summary_report_2017.pdf

This infographic was developed by Lestari in 2023 for Forest Research as part of research which explores the cultural and social value of ToW, through the arts and humanities.

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