Postcards to trees

A way of understanding the
human value of trees

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About Branching Out

Branching Out is a research project funded by the Future of UK Treescapes programme.

The project aimed to develop new ways of mapping, predicting, and communicating the social and cultural values of trees. We combined biophysical data and storytelling with a view to supporting robust, evidence-based decision-making and management of UK treescapes.

Read more about the project on our website.

> Social and cultural values in relation to trees are the ways in which people and communities value the relationships they have with trees. They include: wellbeing, sense of place, and aesthetics.

Methods

Throughout the project, we used storytelling as a way of capturing past, present, and future values of trees through narratives. We used these to co-produce a framework for describing values.

We also captured historical and current data about trees and mapped social and cultural values directly onto real-life trees and treescapes where possible. The research was focused on three case study cities: York, Cardiff, and Milton Keynes.

As part of the wider project, we:

- gathered folklore tree stories of the past
- explored historical maps to identify changes in tree cover over time
- gathered remote sensing data to look at current treescapes
- ran citizen panels to talk about the value of trees and discuss future tree scenarios
- worked with decision-makers to explore how they might use our research
- ran storytelling workshops to gather drawings, stories, and videos about the value of trees
- organised creative design workshops to develop methods for representing values
- developed postcards as a way to capture stories about trees.

Postcards as a method

We used a range of creative research methods to help bring to light different types of values. People explore and express values in different ways depending on the activity, and so creative methods can help us achieve a more complete understanding of how people relate to trees.

One of the creative methods we used was the creation of postcards written to past, present, and future trees. This was part of a wider exercise during three sessions at a Future Treescapes conference in Glasgow in 2024.

During these sessions, participants were asked to be one of five trees and were given cards with information about their tree. They then carried out a series of tasks:

- Exploring the project dashboard and stories about their tree

- Filling in a data card with information relating to their tree

- Writing a postcard to their future or past 'self' as their tree

Using these postcards as an engaging workshop activity encouraged participants to explore the project's data and allowed us to capture their values for the trees in an engaging way. It also helped us to collect stories about trees in a simple and unique way.

GREETINGS FROM THE PRESENT

⚥ BRANCHING OUT
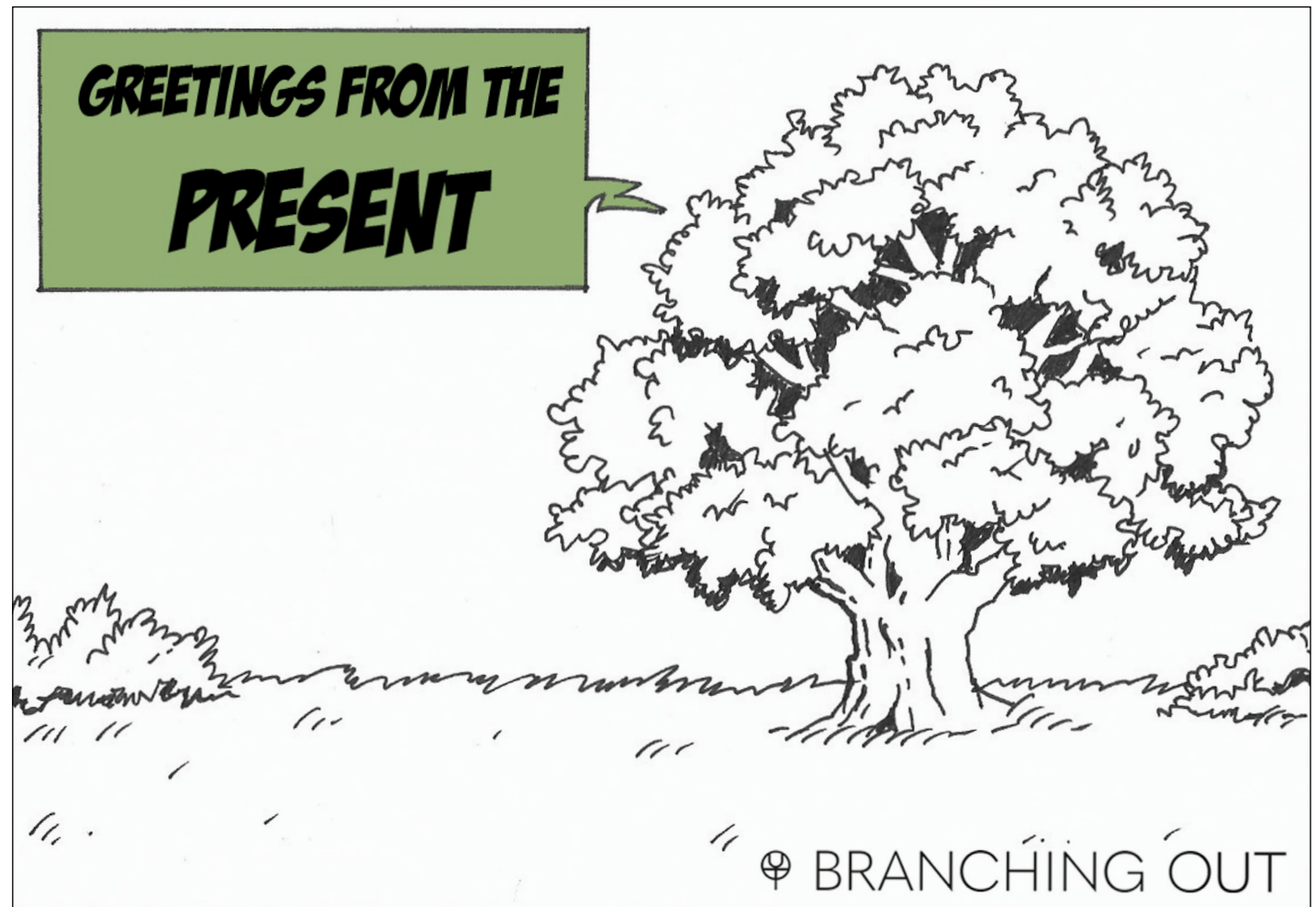
Dashboard and stories

The dashboard presented our participants with a collection of historical maps and current tree cover maps. It allowed them to explore specific trees within the case study area and read quotes from the social data relating to those trees.

Participants were also given a range of tree stories and associated values. From these, they decided which stories related to their own tree.

You Are A

An old pear tree

Fruit tree

What's your story?
Basic background

Location: West of the loop of Dudley Hill, Shenley Church End

Location:
- ☐ Historic map
- ☒ Present map
- ☒ Public land
- ☐ Private land

Type of tree:
- ☒ Fruit tree
- ☐ Street tree
- ☐ Park tree
- ☐ Woodland tree

Likely Life Frames: FROM, IN, WITH, AS

Participants were allocated a tree and received a card like this one with information about their tree.

Data cards

The data cards asked participants to fill in specific data relating to their tree:

| Find out more: Stall 1	Find out more: Stall 2
Height	Relevant stories (Story ID or short title)
Crown radius	i)
CAVATrs value	ii)
	iii)
Who passes by?	
	How were you perceived and valued (by humans and non-humans)?
Who interacts with you?	

Writing the postcards

Instructions

Participants specified their trees on the cards and were urged to be creative, annotating and colouring their postcards however they liked. The postcards were written from the perspective of the trees to either their past, present, or future 'self'. We chose specific years to give participants a timeframe for their ideas on the past, present, and future.

Past

Greetings from the past (1930) to the present: write a postcard to your future self that expresses nostalgia. What is your life like? How are you doing? How have you been interacted with?
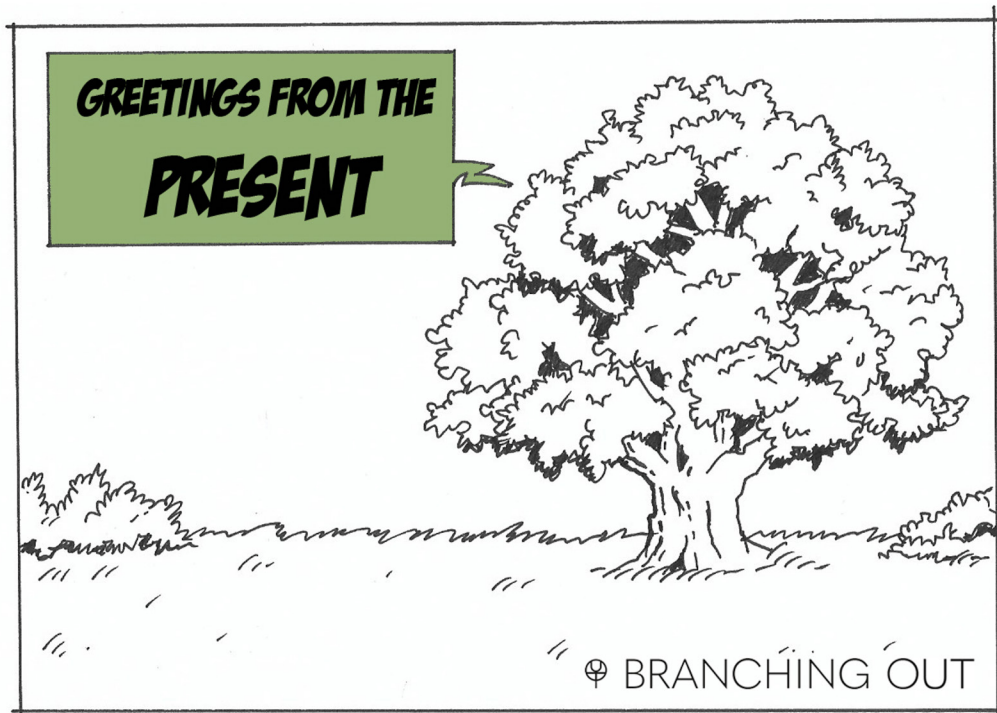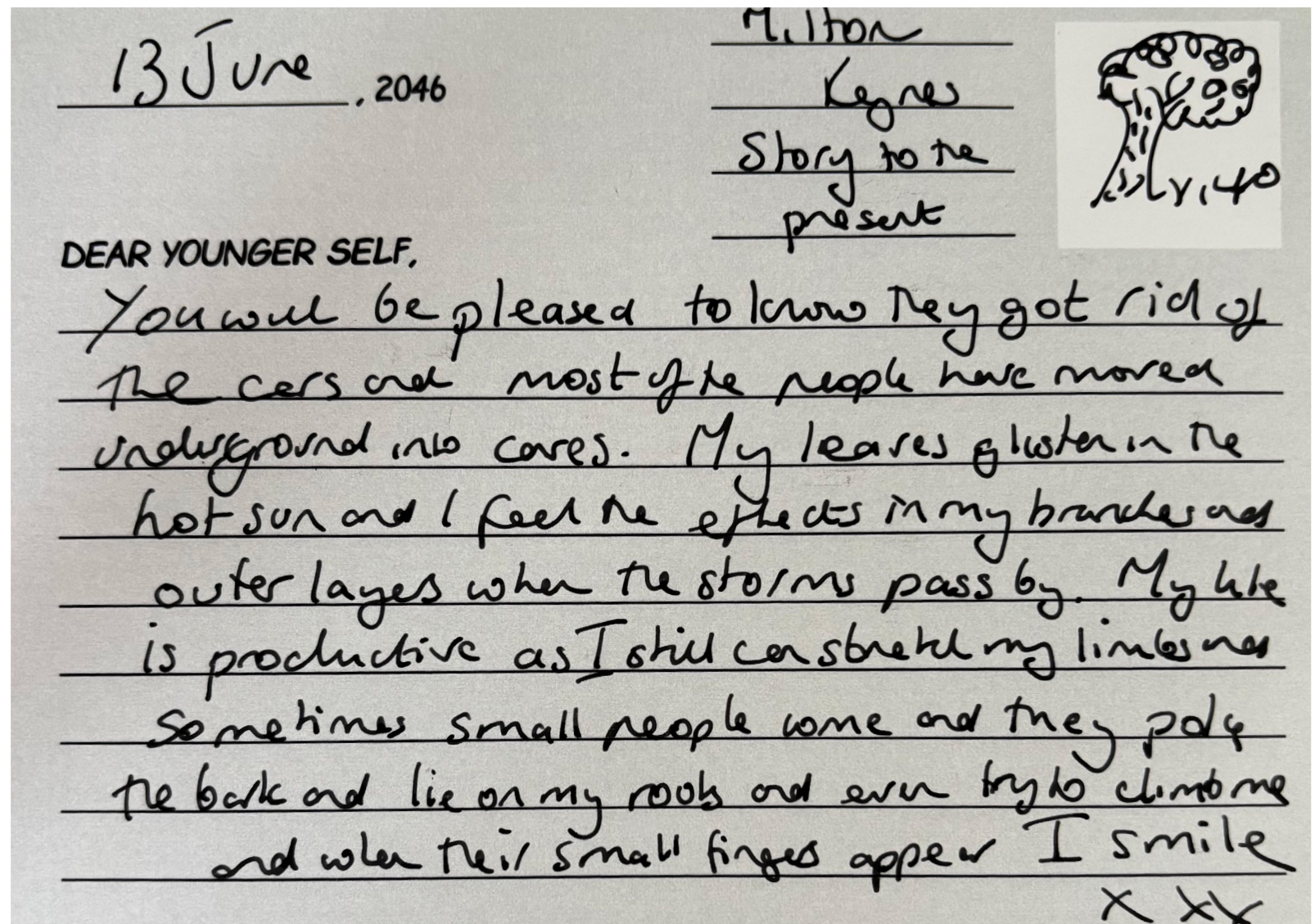
Present

Greetings from the present (2024) to the future: write a postcard to your future self that raises concerns or doubts. What do you think will happen to you based on what's going on around you? Why does your current context need to change? Who can help?

Future

Greetings from the future (2046) to the present: write a postcard to your younger self. What have you learned? Why are you important? What do you wish you knew when you were young?

GREETINGS FROM THE PRESENT

⚲ BRANCHING OUT

_____ ,2024

DEAR OLDER SELF,

The final postcards

We collected 22 postcards and 11 'Find out more' cards in total. A subset of 10 postcards is included here as examples of what the respondents wrote.

13 June, 2046

Milton
Keynes
Story to the
present

DEAR YOUNGER SELF,

You will be pleased to know they got rid of the cars and most of the people have moved underground into caves. My leaves glisten in the hot sun and I feel the effects in my branches and outer layers when the storms pass by. My life is productive as I still can stretch my limbs and sometimes small people come and they poke the bark and lie on my roots and even try to climb me and when their small fingers appear I smile

X XX

Postcard: Kate Pahl

_____ , 2024

DEAR OLDER SELF,

Hello Beauty! I hope you are still thriving — giving shade and perspective and a place of rest — time out of place — to the children of the children who play at my roots now. I am fearful — my family of Oaken breathren/sisters are all gone — I feel alone. I hope you are loved

Postcard: Jemima Morgan

12th June, 2024

an old pear
tree at Shenley
Church End.

DEAR OLDER SELF,

I've seen so many stories pass below my branches. The abundance of moths, hymenoptera, flies + birds that have landed for a short while amidst them. The mosses + lichen that call them home. The children that ate my fruit on family walks + trips to the park grown tall as they too disperse to the world. My branches now grow old, the species that call them home shifting. I might not have much time left as a living tree, but I hope in death my branches like my fruit will go on to sustain life upon life upon life.

Postcard: Ellie Dimambro-Denson

Pear tree, 2046

Milton Keynes.
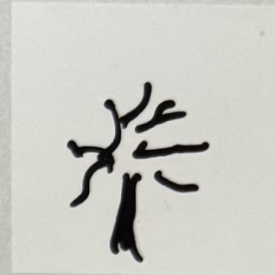
DEAR YOUNGER SELF,

Hang in there. You're in for a turbulent time; you'll no longer be able to rely on the seasons so rest when you can. Send your roots deep and wide, because your connections with others will see you through — things below ground are more stable. Some of the friends living in your branches will have to leave — mourn the loss as you must, and value those who stay. New guests will arrive. You're going to be OK, but you'll have to adapt.

Postcard: Gill Tavner

13 June , 2046

North Eleventh St.
Central Milton
Keynes

DEAR YOUNGER SELF,

The way I grow now is hidden, deep and dark below the moving world. I reach out to parts of our world which the humans passing over me will never witness, but trust to play their part in our entangled living. We breathe and feed and drink from each other and the world around us, within us, and we trust that we are enough, and that there is enough. We live in a state of plenty, generous with what we have and exchanging for what we have not. We all belong.

Postcard: Emma Bessent

13/06 _____, 2046   Ash, Street Tree

                                        1ST

DEAR YOUNGER SELF,

Well done! You made it this far....
The Ash Dieback was scourge of 2027 was
pretty terrifying, but thank goodness that the
strategy changed to allow you and your
neighbours, show + develop resistance. You carry the
scars of that, but look at how things improved
now that Watling Street + London Road no longer
have the cars. The houses that sprung up wound
you, and the children that climb you, and the
insects, birds & mammals that call you home say thanks!

Postcard: Simon Carr

11

20th November, 1930

Matilda
Scharsach
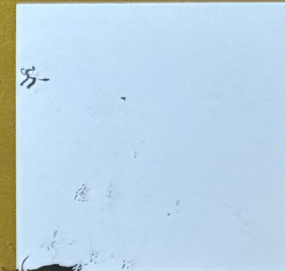
DEAR OLDER SELF,

Today it's cold and wintry, and there is snow on my boughs. Many people have sheltered from the harsh winds. There were cattle rubbing their flanks on my trunk, but one man cut off one of my branches which worried me.

I hope that in just under a hundred years I'm still here and surrounded by more trees like myself.

Postcard: Matilda Scharsach

12

_____ , 1930

DEAR OLDER SELF,

Between us, we have seen a lot of change. I grew up beside a lane, between fields surrounding a farm; I grew strong, fast, uninhibited but ultimately I had to leave to make space for humans. I didn't have a choice, and my story was a sad one, but I'm hopeful for the future that another me will come back again. I hope you - another me - and I can thrive together.

Postcard: Kate Pahl

Pear
Fruit tree ____ , 2046

Milton ____
Keynes. ____
____
____

DEAR YOUNGER SELF,
~~Dear~~ I am tired now, having lived for
100 years, but I feel we have lived a
happy life. Many generations of children
& ~~so~~ birds have fed on ~~they~~ our ~~branches~~ fruit so
my advice is to not worry about getting
older. The same will pass as before.
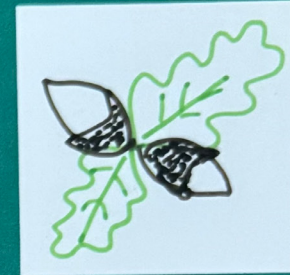   So there, my dear pear,
    Do not scare, or compere,
    You are where you always were.
            Love, Pears.

Postcard: Amelia Hood

14

24 June, 2024
1.2m

The
Car
Park

DEAR OLDER SELF,
Well, future me, I hope by now we have caught a break. I feel rushed off my ~~feet~~ roots! So much hustle & bustle. People rushing past all the time, cars rumbling along. And those eager little saplings below my canopy all fighting for space. Everybody is so busy they barely have time to notice me. I hope one day it all slows down.

Postcard: Fritha West

Analysis

After collecting the postcards, we carried out a manifest content analysis to find meaning in the stories. This was done through a four-step process of decontextualisation, recontextualisation, categorisation, and compilation (Bengtsson, 2016).

The cards were then categorised into different 'life frames' which describe the trees' relational values and relationships with people. The life frames pictured in the Values Framework above were based on the IPBES (Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) Values Typology (IPBES, 2022).

VALUES FRAMEWORK

LIVING IN TREESCAPES
Treescapes as places.

LIVING WITH TREESCAPES
Treescapes as space for nature.

LIVING FROM TREESCAPES
Treescapes as a resource.

LIVING AS TREESCAPES
Relationships and kinship with trees.

What we learned from the postcards

From the analysis, we identified 21 categories (or topics) that were discussed in the postcards, shown in the figure below and further described in the table that follows.

Figure 1 Frequency of mentions for each of the 21 categories, split by postcard type (past, present, and future).
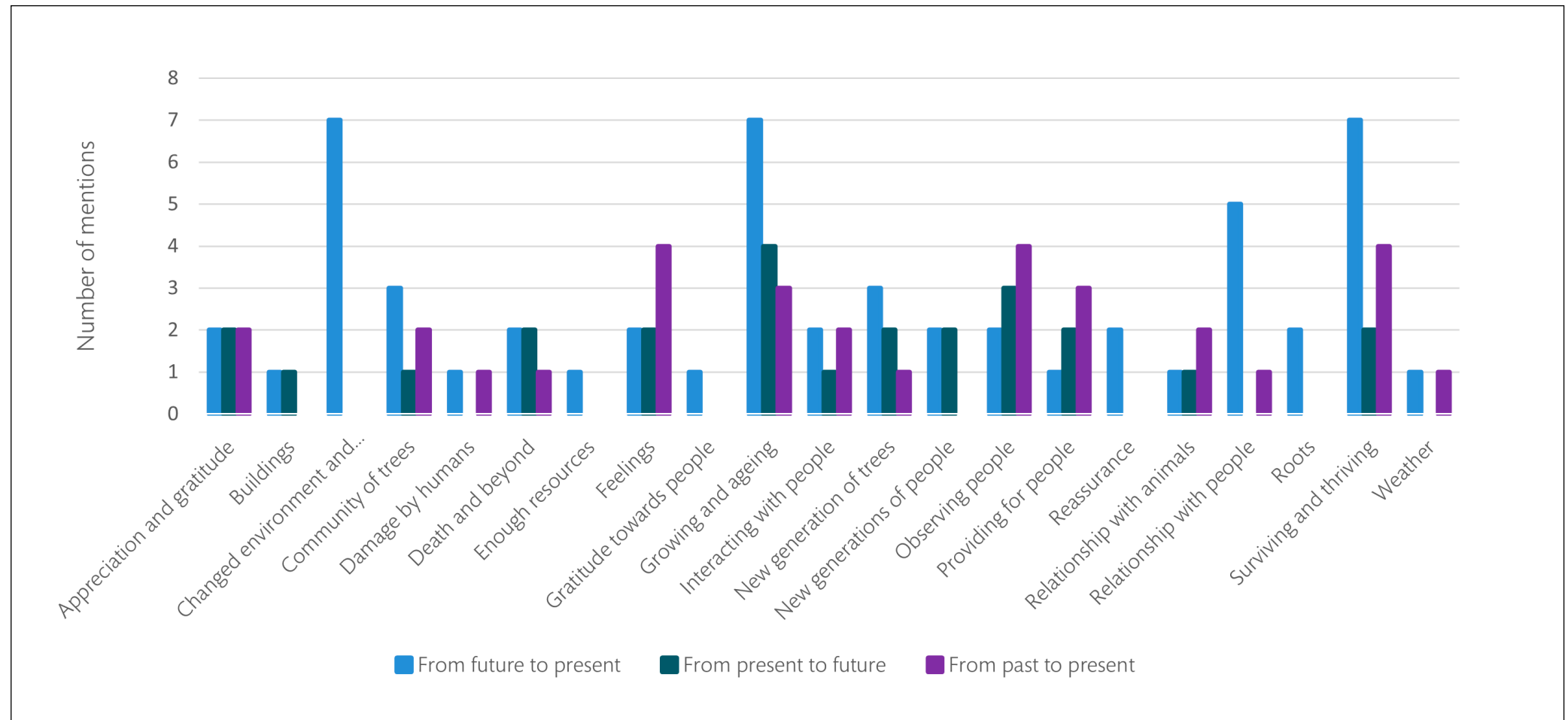
Table 1 Examples of some of the interesting categories covered in the postcards.

Category	Content
Appreciation and gratitude	People thanking the trees for their fruits and other services. Or sometimes mentions of the trees wanting to be noticed, thanked, and appreciated.
Community of trees	Trees living together with their friends, such as trees on a lane, or in a community around them.
Death and beyond	Trees dying and what happens after their death – providing nutrients to the soil and other benefits.
Observing people	Observing people walking past with their dogs, commuting, rushing, playing, etc. Sometimes the people notice the trees, sometimes they do not.
Relationship with people	How trees and people make each other think and feel, and how they think and feel about each other. Mentions of entangled living, sharing of resources, and people fighting for trees' survival.
Growing and ageing	Many accounts about how trees grow and age – how it leads to weak branches, fewer fruits, more lichens, and so on. These were often told in a human-like fashion, with the writers imagining what experiences and feelings of ageing look like for a tree. Sometimes mentioned with sadness around reduced interactions with people and animals who visit younger trees.
Feelings	Expressions of the trees feeling sad, happy, jealous, etc.
Changed environment and surroundings	Environmental changes such as climate change or changed surroundings, such as carless streets. These were always in postcards from the future telling how things have changed – for the better or the worse.
New generation of trees	As time passes, new trees grow. These can sometimes provide more resources and gain more interaction with people than the older trees.
Providing for people	Providing fruits, shelter, and a place to rest.

The values we hold for trees can be seen as a spectrum from a one-way use of trees by humans, to an interwined relationship, to a mutual relationship as shown in the figure below. This gradient of 'life frames' is illustrated in the Values Framework on page 16.

Figure 2 Life frames as presented in the postcards mapped onto those from the Values Framework
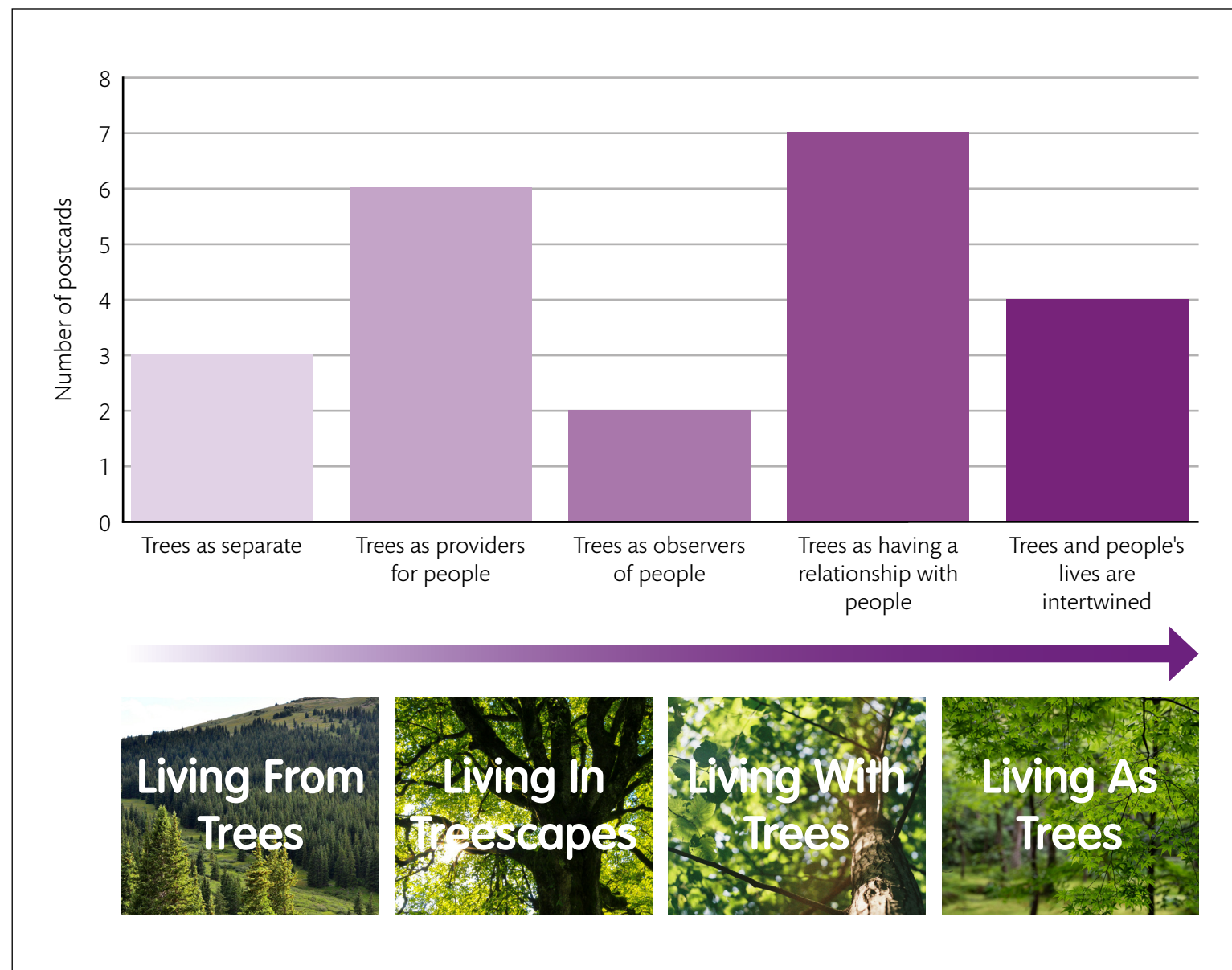
Key takeaways

- The participants often considered the trees' experiences from a human perspective, for example, imagining how trees experience ageing based on how humans age, or considering emotions that the trees might feel.

- The participants considered the trees' relationships with people as well as animals and their environment, providing lively accounts of what it feels like to be a tree.

- The participants described interactions between people and trees in terms of expressions of gratitude, trees thinking about people and their lives, people talking about trees with each other, and sometimes people working to protect trees.

The postcards from the future often focused on changes to the world the trees inhabit, while postcards from the past focused on the trees' feelings and anticipations for the future.

Feedback from participants

At the end of the session, participants provided feedback on Post-It notes which they were asked to stick onto the branches of a 'tree'. They were given three categories to help guide their feedback, which we have summarised here.

Ideas the session prompted

- The importance of culture and inclusion of culture in science
- Appreciating the opportunity and importance of taking the perspective of the tree
- The power of stories

Key words to describe the session

- Fun
- Interesting
- Engaging
- Thought-provoking

> **A lesson learned**
> 'Our small everyday stories and interactions with local trees hold a lot of importance and power, even if it is difficult to quantify'

Conclusion

The postcards were a creative way to engage participants with the stories of individual trees, and were useful and enjoyable as a conclusion to the sessions after the participants had spent some time exploring the dashboard.

The postcards reflected a wide range of ways in which people relate to trees through diverse stories written from different perspectives and with a range of endings.

The Branching Out project team hope to see some of the more positive future scenarios from the postcards come to life.
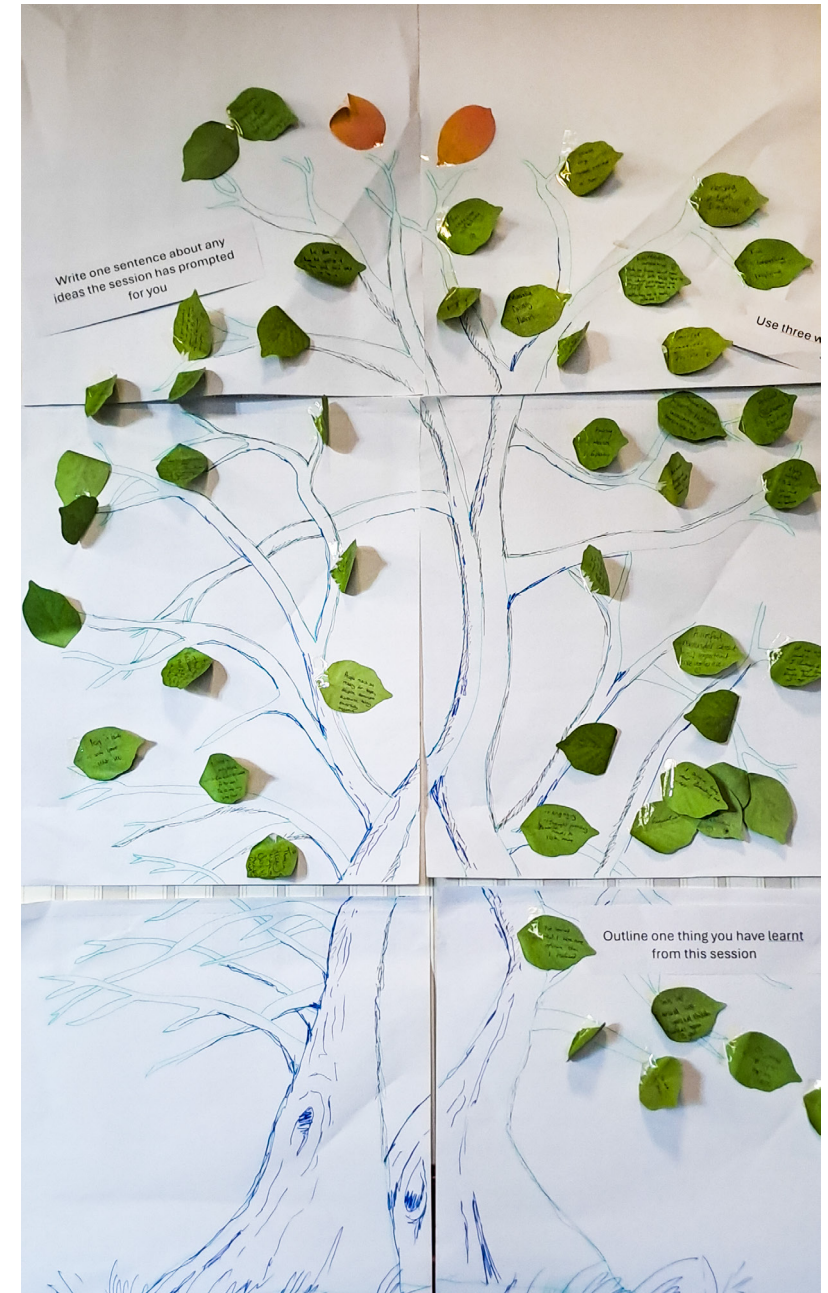
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Authors

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The Branching Out team

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Future of UK treescapes

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IPBES (2022) Summary for Policymakers of the Methodological Assessment Report on the Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Service. Bonn, Germany: IPBES secretariat. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6522392

Bengtsson, M. (2016). 'How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis', NursingPlus open, 2, pp. 8-14. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.npls.2016.01.001