Forest Research

Research Note

Sycamore in future treescapes: Attitudes and values of tree and woodland professionals in the UK

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Resilience to climate change, the threat of pests and diseases, tackling the biodiversity crisis, and the implications of these issues for the future of the tree and woodland sector are necessarily being foregrounded in management discussions. As a naturalised, fast-growing, and adaptable species with increasing evidence to support its ecological value and potential contribution to future forest resilience, sycamore has a place in these discussions. However, the species has long been considered controversial among professionals across the tree and woodland sector, particularly by those working in conservation. Claims that the use and value of sycamore is contested by different professional groups in the UK are largely anecdotal and not based on empirical social science. This research sought to explore the variety of attitudes and values associated with sycamore by different professional groups, how these translate into management practices and policies, and the implications of these findings for future consideration of sycamore in UK landscapes. For further information, references, and the full results from this research please visit the project webpage.

Thinking about values

Taking a pragmatic approach to what can be a vast and complicated body of theory, we define values broadly as the ways in which things (places, species, trees, environments, relationships) matter to people, expressed through ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. While we make some distinction between values and attitudes (which can be understood as positive or negative evaluations of a thing), these are difficult to disentangle in practice and have been approached interchangeably. The relationship between values, attitudes, and behaviours is complex and it is worth noting that while values are often positioned as a precursor or determinant to behaviours, values alone do not equate to behaviours (the value-action gap), and so caution is recommended when inferring actions from values (and vice versa).

Methods

This Research Note draws on empirical evidence from interviews with five land managers and three focus groups with a total of 24 professionals from the tree and woodland sector. Additionally, it draws on a scoping review of existing social science literature and a literature review of the ecological value of sycamore. Some participants preferred their quotes to be fully anonymised, and in these cases their organisations are not listed. We grouped focus group participants into three broad professional groupings based on the ways in which they conceptualise or interact with sycamore in their role:

Strategic – those who make decisions about sycamore or that will indirectly affect sycamore (e.g. policy-makers)

Tactical – those who view sycamore as an object of interest (e.g. landscape architects, scientists, ecologists, ecology consultants)

Operational – those who directly manage or otherwise 'deal with' sycamore (e.g. land managers, arboriculturists/arborists, hedge-layers, conservation practitioners, foresters)

The range of values and attitudes to sycamore

Conservation professionals have historically expressed negative attitudes towards sycamore, but this is changing

'In my early career, we were still spending a lot of money removing sycamore from sites because of its non-nativeness. And because of its invasive behaviour.' (Strategic, Natural England)

Participants described how negative attitudes towards sycamore were largely based on an understanding that it is invasive and poses a threat to native habitats. Some participants maintained these attitudes, while others argued that there was not enough evidence to support such claims. Others believed that attitudes towards sycamore within conservation were shifting to become more accepting in certain contexts (e.g. on some sites which have been affected by ash dieback).

There is a lack of up-to-date ecological evidence on both the benefits and disbenefits of sycamore in a variety of contexts

'I think there is a view, there's a starting point in the sector, that's almost like, "sycamore is bad". People just absorb that in their career [...] there is no evidence to back it.' (Strategic, Natural England)

While participants reflected that negative attitudes to sycamore, particularly within conservation, had softened, they expressed that there is still uncertainty about the potential impacts of including sycamore on sensitive sites, especially with regard to its invasiveness. Some participants expressed doubt about the degree to which existing policy and guidance about including sycamore on such sites is based on sound, current ecological evidence. This uncertainty sometimes led to disagreement about how, when, and where to include sycamore in different contexts.

Most participants believe they are approaching sycamore pragmatically with a 'right tree, right place' attitude

'It's the right tree in the right place. [Sycamore] is opportunistic and it has certain situations where it's not the best tree in the world.' (Operational)

We found that site and management context (e.g. in a forestry plantation, in a hedge, on a site protected for biodiversity, on

farmland, in a peri-urban area lacking tree cover, on an ash-depleted site) were more likely to affect participants' attitudes to sycamore and its acceptability than their membership of a professional group. However, in practice, the maxim of 'right tree, right place' can obscure the role that values and attitudes play in shaping stakeholder preferences regarding sycamore. Unrecognised, these preferences can shape conflicting approaches to managing or researching sycamore. Recognising these preferences can provide a means of understanding why these conflicting approaches and subsequent tensions might occur, and how to address them when they do.

Professionals value sycamore in a variety of ways

'When you look into the future, trees for the future, sycamore is bomb-proof. I think, in terms of considering what we have in the future when you can see stuff struggling, sycamore is one of those that will stand the test of time.' (Operational)

'The woodlands around here are quite depleted. There's quite a lot of bare ground that's been over-grazed and over-burnt for many years. The sycamore is proving to be quite a reservoir for certain species until woodlands are re-established around them. There are some species that seem to favour sycamore over other trees.' (Operational)

Many participants valued sycamore as a resilient tree with unique ecological and environmental benefits, an important aesthetic and cultural feature of certain landscapes, and as a tree with strategic potential to mitigate tree loss to disease and contribute to resilient and multifunctional woods of the future. Some participants expressed positive personal connections to specific sycamore trees, as well as affinities for the species in general. Participants also described what they saw as the relational value ascribed to sycamore by members of the public who, in their experience, valued trees that they are familiar with for their age, historical presence, and contribution to landscape aesthetics, as well as the ecosystem services they provide. The public reaction to the loss of the Sycamore Gap tree in Northumberland was referenced several times as an example of this.

Regional and landscape context play an important role in shaping attitudes to sycamore and perceptions of its future viability

'In Northumberland, where I live, we have quite a lot of veteran trees, and a good handful of them are sycamore. They have been there as cornerstones of the community, for the people living here, for generations, and generations, and generations.' (Strategic, Natural England)

'I wouldn't recommend planting it in the parks I'm in [...] as the rest of the country catches up with where London is in terms of climate, and I think you're potentially going to see a lot more issues in terms of sooty bark disease.' (Operational, Royal Parks)

In addition to socio-cultural values, regional and landscape contexts were also significant determinants of where sycamore would be considered 'useful' or viable to plant. For example, participants highlighted how sooty bark disease and grey squirrel damage negatively impact sycamore in the south of England. In contrast, other participants described how Scotland's climatic conditions, absence of grey squirrels, and loss of both ash and elm in some areas make for a more viable context for sycamore.

Tensions and uncertainty

The research highlighted some points of tension between the values associated with sycamore and what can broadly be understood as the priorities and norms of certain professions. In this sense, sycamore could be considered as a proxy for some of the tensions inherent in multifunctional treescapes. There was also uncertainty expressed in relation to interpreting guidance and strategic approaches in 'real-world' scenarios and a perceived lack of clear or agreed approaches to sycamore from some organisations.

What to call sycamore

'It's barking nonsense not to consider it naturalised. It grows extremely well here. When so many of our native species are struggling, so many pests and diseases, we need to be augmenting the species that we plant and promote, not narrowing that restriction because of this quasi, "Is it naturalised, is it native?" argument.' (Tactical, Future Trees Trust)

'I find it Orwellian to say, "When is it going to be described as native?" Because unless I had evidence that it was originally here, I wouldn't describe it as native.' (Strategic, Natural England)

While most participants thought of sycamore as a 'naturalised' species, the proliferation of (sometimes conflicting) terminology used to describe sycamore both in the focus groups and in general (e.g. organisation webpages, educational leaflets, blog posts) reflects uncertainty about sycamore's origins and 'right to

be here', what its impact or contribution is and should be to our treescapes, and, consequently, whether it should be accepted or excluded from certain habitats and landscapes. This reflects broader debates within the conservation sector about terminology and the place of non-native species in a rapidly changing natural environment.

There is uncertainty about including sycamore on sensitive sites

'There's an increasing demand to plant sycamore, and I have to respond to that [...] in SSSI [Site of Special Scientific Interest] terms, we would not encourage planting sycamore into a site that does not already have sycamore. And if a site already does have sycamore, I would be encouraging natural regeneration, but not planting. So, that's the position that I've taken. I don't know whether it's right or not.' (Strategic, Natural England)

'It would be fantastic if we were able to say that sycamore would be an acceptable replacement [for ash] to plant in those sites, to meet the SAC [Special Area of Conservation] restoration criteria, because at this moment we're not going to be able to do much more restoration until we've decided what trees we're happy with replacing things like ash with. So, it means that that work isn't being done, which means we're failing on those targets.' (Strategic, Natural England)

Some participants expressed uncertainty about how to interpret guidance on sycamore and sensitive sites. While some still actively removed sycamore from such sites, others would allow sycamore to 'seed in' to native woodlands or sensitive sites but were opposed to the idea of planting it on purpose. Other participants – particularly those who were responsible for the management of sites affected by tree loss due to disease – found the distinction between planting and natural colonisation arbitrary and pointed to cases in which it would be ecologically beneficial, and in their view urgent, to plant sycamore.

There is uncertainty about the translation of strategic policy into management practices 'on the ground'

'I think having a very clear philosophical output is important. It's a rationale for its acceptance or its rejection, and I don't feel that we're quite there, as a community [...] it's making the case for why we would accept it, and if it is because it can support our biodiversity, and that's under threat, that's a good reason. But if there is a rationale behind nature conservation being of our native flora and fauna, then that is a reason not to.' (Strategic, Natural England)

'We probably broadly agree at the centre, with a bit of noise around the edges, but I think, as you then drift out into an organisation, individuals on the front line, in a big organisation like ours, will carry their own personal views.' (Strategic, Natural England)

Participants highlighted that a variety of values and attitudes towards sycamore exist within single organisations. There was particular uncertainty about how an organisation's strategic objectives translate to practitioners 'on the ground', particularly in the context of a shift in strategic objectives towards forest resilience.

Participants were frustrated with existing metrics of value which do not account for the holistic, context-specific value of sycamore

'In my line of work, it's sometimes been hard to justify, when I've seen some of these trees [sycamore], to justify why I think they're important. Because the legislation and the guidelines don't really give me – because it's a sycamore, it automatically gets assigned to this rubbish bin known as non-native.' (Tactical, environmental consultancy)

'The Sycamore Gap issue to me epitomised what is quite a substantial failure, in my view, amongst the professional sector to completely fail to understand the public's views on trees over and over again. How the public view trees in a very, very different way to we do.' (Operational, Royal Parks)

Some participants were frustrated that current conservation value metrics and classifications inhibit the recognition and realisation of sycamore's ecological, environmental, and/or socio-cultural value (e.g. relational, landscape) on sites where there may be a case for its benefits (e.g. restoration of ash- or elm-depleted sites, or in peri-urban areas with low tree cover).

Some participants also highlighted a tension between what they saw as professional or scientific perceptions of the lack of value of sycamore (because it is a non-native species) and the way in which members of the public perceive the value of sycamore. They felt that, in some instances, these public values are not currently being translated into professional practices.

Implications for policy and future management

This research has shown that a range of values and attitudes have historically influenced and continue to influence how sycamore is perceived by tree and woodland professionals. However, uncertainty and tensions in how sycamore is valued are now being foregrounded as the sector feels the impacts of, and the need to adapt to and mitigate, rapid environmental change (i.e. increasing prevalence and impact of tree pests and diseases, changing climate, biodiversity loss). Some of the professionals we spoke with are observing and experiencing the consequences of such uncertainty and tension, in terms of tangible impacts on both the capacity for and speed of tree and woodland habitat restoration and adaptation. Participants highlighted the growing pressures on woodlands to deliver multiple benefits (i.e. productive forestry and other public goods) and related uncertainty and tensions around the role of sycamore in this.

Recommendations

The uncertainties and tensions outlined above require attention at a sector level to support professionals in navigating decisions about sycamore within complex socio-environmental contexts. Participants spoke about the need for cross-sectoral discussions about environmental resilience and the place of sycamore within it, as well as the need for a more joined up approach to managing trees in the landscape for multiple benefits.

Acknowledging the diversity of values that sycamore has in different professional contexts will allow for better and more strategic decision-making about where it should be included and why. This could include a review of current assessment systems associated with the classification of native versus non-native species, which often do not account for the value of sycamore in a holistic, context-specific way.

More current evidence about the ecological and environmental benefits and disbenefits of sycamore in different contexts is needed. Participants also called for more consistent translation of such evidence into policy and guidance, particularly in relation to the inclusion of sycamore on sensitive or ash-depleted sites.

Addressing the conflicting terminology used to describe sycamore (e.g. naturalised, non-native, invasive, advancing native) would also help to clarify opposing views of its status and behaviour in different contexts in the UK.

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