

Young people's socio-cultural values in relation to trees outside woodland

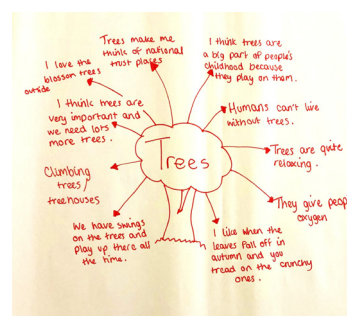
Young people have not been well represented in discussions about trees outside woodlands in peri-urban and rural areas (ToWPUR), resulting in their experiences and attitudes being overlooked in policy frameworks and management strategies for these landscapes. This research addresses this gap by examining young people's experiences of, and relationships with, ToWPUR, exploring their socio-cultural values and their specific value orientations as expressed during discussions about landscape change. The study employed a multi-site research design across three geographic areas (Cornwall, East Sussex, and the Peak District), conducting 12 participatory interactive workshops with 48 young people aged 10–15. These workshops included value-mapping exercises, peer-to-peer interviews and groups discussions, role play activities, and a Youth Council.

Key findings

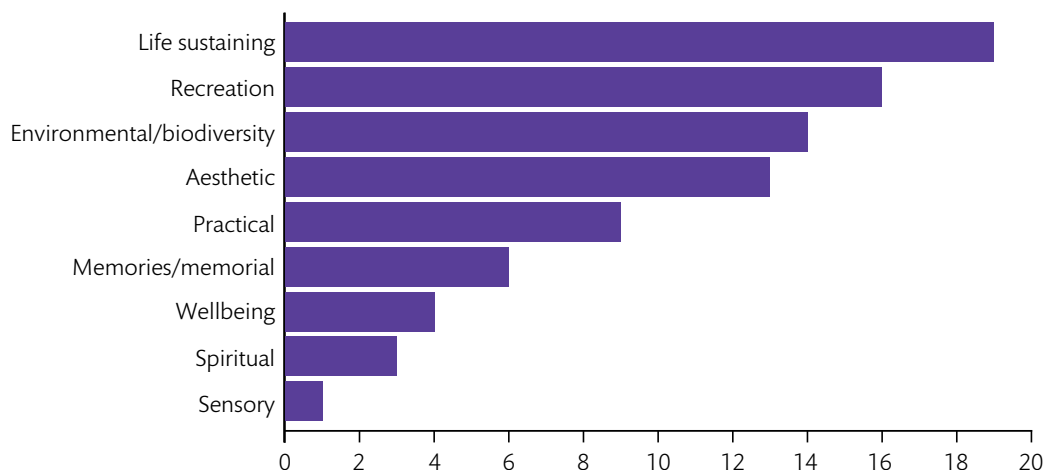
- Young people develop strong connections with specific trees through multi-sensory interactions, particularly through play and observing seasonal changes.
- They demonstrated positive attitudes towards trees in general, valuing them for multiple purposes: as spaces for play and recreation, places of retreat with restorative value, and for their environmental and biodiversity benefits.
- The development of these values is influenced by three key factors: i) family and friends, who shape experiential engagement and foster positive attitudes towards tree preservation; ii) school-based learning, which enhances understanding of environmental and biodiversity importance; iii) age-related transitions, where value orientations shift from play-focused to appreciating trees for socialising and retreat.
- Regional variations in engagement were evident and were influenced by local tree cover, cultural practices, and traditions associated with trees.

'I think that school has really changed the way that we think about trees, when you go higher up, because it talks more about like the scientific bits about it and how important they are for us to live, and the animals, and everything, really'

Imogen, 11, Peak District

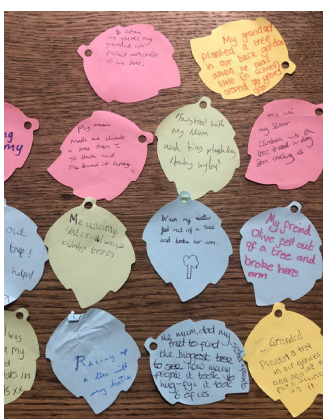
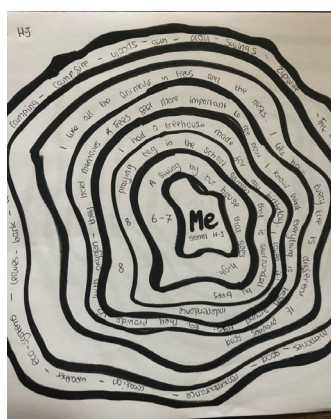
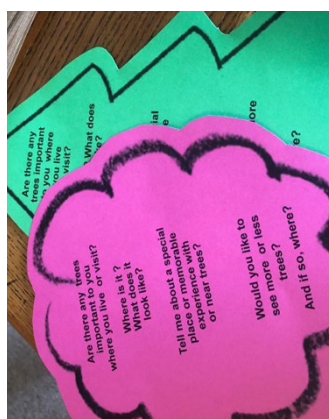


Prioritised values of ToWPUR from workshops with young people



Recommendations

- Young people should be involved in processes which seek to recognise and record important ToWPUR for protection.
- Targeted, as well as more routine, educational opportunities for young people to engage with trees should be encouraged and expanded. Where possible this will combine abstract learning with direct experiences (such as with Forest Schools).
- Planners and managers of peri-urban and rural areas should prioritise conserving and making accessible family-friendly areas of ToWPUR, as experiences with family and friends are central to positive value formation among young people.
- Greater use of age-appropriate platforms, such as YouTube and wider social media, as well as more virtual spaces such as in gaming, as a productive route to messaging to young people about ToWPUR and trees more generally.
- Future research should seek to expand on the participatory and creative approaches taken here, as values and understandings of ToWPUR are often embedded within broader narratives, memories, and everyday practices. Taking time to carefully uncover and explore these layered meanings proves vital for meaningful engagement.
- Those undertaking research and enacting policies on treescapes and ToWPUR should create a Young Persons Citizens' Advisory Committee. This would offer opportunity for: peer-to-peer learning amongst young people; the sharing of young people's views and knowledge on ToWPUR; young people to become ambassadors and advocates, among their peers and beyond, for future ToWPUR conservation and management.



'Trees have influenced me a lot because they build character if you fall from them, because you then know not to do that again, or not to step there. They're quite nice to chill out around because they're pretty peaceful'

Erik, 12, East Sussex

'My mum likes going out in nature and stuff, she loves the autumn when the trees go yellow and orange, so I guess that's kind of like – that's had an effect on how I like trees and stuff'

Isabel, 14, Cornwall

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This research is part of a wider project aimed at exploring the social and cultural values that people associate with trees outside of woodland, and is funded by Defra's Nature for Climate Fund Programme .



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