

WOODLAND CULTURE

Humans were once just one species among many in the natural world. We soon began out-competing the others and - since the arrival of agriculture - we have seized more and more of the world's resources. The result is increasing urbanisation and our ravenous consumer culture. As our civilisations have grown, trees and forests have suffered. The wild natural world continues to function around us, but it is much altered and depleted. Our conquest has reduced nature to a mere service-provider and left us, in Britain at least, without an engaged woodland culture. Here we seek to restore our place in the web of life, starting with trees.

Common Ground - where Culture meets Nature

If we can understand our long cultural relationship with trees, we might see why we now have so few, when once we had so many. We could then consider whether we want more trees; and if so, what sorts of trees, where they might grow, who might be involved and how this might happen...

What has led to the demise of trees? In the deep past, our once-extensive forests were cleared for agriculture and this has been sustained into modern times. We thought we could do without trees.

What has been the effect of this loss? Our country has very low tree cover for this part of the world, we import most of our timber, our landscapes are largely open and exposed, we have little forest habitat for wildlife, and we ourselves have only passing acquaintance with trees and woods.

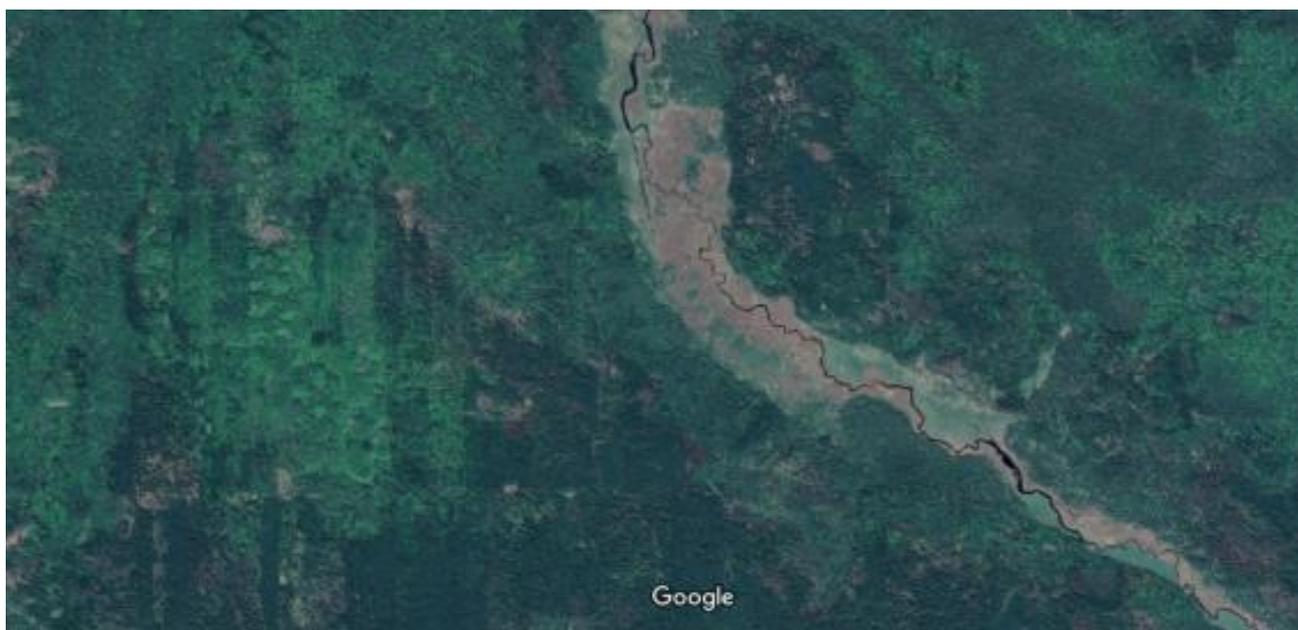
How has this affected our culture? 'Woodland culture' barely exists in the UK; we are a modern industrial economy seemingly removed from nature, yet steadily destroying it. Trees and woods are degraded and accorded low value and status. If, as Auden put it, 'a culture is no better than its woods', then we have indeed sunk low.

How might we bring trees back into our landscapes, our lives and our culture? We have made great progress with industrial forestry over the last century, but much less progress on the wider wooded landscape. We should accord trees their true value and recognise their



contribution to our lives; we should take responsibility for our timber use and make better use of wood; we should restore an ecologically connected landscape framed around trees; we should show how more of the right trees in the right places can benefit us all.

How could such a cultural shift happen? We need a compelling narrative for the restoration of trees in our lives. We need to re-order our priorities to support the well-being of our natural world and the people living in it. This would certainly be a significant cultural shift and there are encouraging signs it is already happening.



Białowieża Forest, Poland, one of Europe last remaining wildwoods (Google)

Trees as a natural state

As we sit in our boxes of brick and stone, or in our moving metal pods, it is easy to forget that we once lived amongst trees - in trees, surrounded by forest, eating the fruits of the forest, living in wooden shacks, part of the forest. And even before we humans showed up 300,000 years ago, the forest had dominated the Earth for 300 million years. As Richard Mabey says, trees 'are what dry land aspires to become'. The forest came first. We carved out our existence in the protective matrix of the forest, which largely covered these lands. The trees were the very material of our lives. The forest was parent to the hunter gatherers, whose lives were deeply embedded in the natural world.

So the real question is, why *not* trees? What have we done to stop trees growing almost everywhere?

Trees are the natural state of our land and yet everywhere we have suppressed them. We have cut them down, dug them up, burned them to the ground, constrained them. The remaining trees we tolerate, but only on our terms, only in places we choose, only of approved species and of a size and shape convenient to our needs, only for as long as we require. Trees are not permitted natural, wild, free expression in our human-centred lives. No wonder Nature is having a nervous breakdown! And what has it cost us, the oppressors?

To draw a cultural parallel, patriarchy has dominated most human societies for thousands of years until it has come under challenge relatively recently. Could we not effect a similar change to our dominance of nature?

Equal rights for Woods!

Votes for Trees!

The Republic of Trees!

Wildness

Wild nature is 'self-willed' – it does what it likes. We can be part of that wildness, but we cannot control it. Where we do seek to control it, nature becomes tamed, domesticated, enslaved. Still 'natural', but not wild.

Our ancestors inhabited a world of seasonal cycles, a steady state of birth, growth, decay and rebirth. This circular culture lasted for thousands of years, until we prized ourselves away from the earth, the centre could not hold us, and we shot off on our linear tangent of progress, civilisation and catastrophic growth.

The history of human civilisation is largely the story of our enslavement of wild nature. For all their connection with nature, it seems the hunter-gatherers over-exploited the low-hanging fruits of the forest, killed off the mega-fauna and created scarcity. This in turn led to settled agriculture, the clearance of land and the control of nature to provide our needs.

There have been massive short-term gains from our exploitation of nature, but now we are seeing the (not-so) hidden costs: global climate is disrupted and ecosystems are in a state of collapse, and our cosy civilisations face challenges of food supply, fresh water, pollution and population growth. We started controlling the world around us in northern Europe around 11,000 years ago with the advent of agriculture. This inclination to control and dominate has continued and expanded to the point that we are reducing nature to a few items of immediate benefit to us, such as wheat, maize, spruce, cattle and chickens.

But whereas these species exist as independent commodities on an accounting balance sheet, in the real world they are deeply embedded in the web of life and cannot thrive outside it. And neither can we. We once thought that subjugating all that wilderness would protect our own little patch – surely killing all those wolves would be good for our sheep? – but it turns out we are all woven of the same cloth, the fabric of nature, the 'more-than-human' world, and we need that spectrum of wildness, a vast hinterland of wild nature supporting the small realm of human activity. We do not understand fully how nature functions, so our tinkering has led to catastrophic imbalances and a great wave of extinctions as we make nature uninhabitable for many species.

We are also beginning to realise what this enslavement has done to us, the would-be masters. Apart for the obvious disadvantage of biting the hand that feeds us, we are left here in the British Isles with a fragmented forest on a degraded island, on a dying planet. Our oceans are awash with plastic to the farthest depths; our rainforests are being pulped at seemingly unstoppable rates; many species, once companions on our evolutionary journey, face

extinction. Nature and wildness are diminished in our suburban minds; we live with constant loss and grief; we lose our connection with the living world.



UK landscape (Google)

The anthropologist Wade Davis famously said that 'every language is an old growth forest of the mind'. We could likewise say that every old growth forest is a language of the earth, allowed to express itself fully. But we have long stopped listening...

Human place in nature - Where do we belong?

It's hard for us to live in nature, so accustomed are we to our estrangement. The story of human civilisation describes our gradual detachment from nature and emergence from the forest into the 'civis', the city. We have made clearings, pushed back the shady forest and created pools of light for our great projects. These clearings gradually joined up, leaving the forest matrix fragmented. We also feared the forest for its wild animals and social outcasts, a place of danger, even terror, both real and imagined. Originally the forest was 'the condition' and the clearings were the exception; now the human project is the condition and forests and wilderness are the exception.

Like surly teenagers, we railed against the restrictive embrace of our forest home, striking out on our own, denying our past, striving for freedom from constraint, leaving nature far behind us. We now live beyond ourselves - my house is my shell, my car contracts miles, my phone collapses continents, gadgets bring all to me, I am greedy for speed, time, stuff, thrills; I am barely in this place, on this Earth. All very well, but we stand on the shoulders of 10,000 generations of humans who brought us this far. We would not last long if we were truly free from all this family history and our forest home.

So how can we be free and still be part of nature? Can we find a creative path through the forest, like a bird? Can we feel, as David Abram suggests, a ‘carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us’?

And what would it take to restore forest cover around us again? What sort of landscape would that be to inhabit? Can we imagine living in a treed landscape as our natural state as humans? A landscape rich in woods, autumn leaves, bluebells, mud and puddles...

We have paved our world with our grand projects - fields of wheat, fields of cows, car-parks, houses, plantations. Looking down from an aeroplane, these great slabs of intent cover almost the whole land... but trees erupt through the cracks, like weeds in a pavement, pushing up around the edges, by the streams, above the field boundaries, quietly pursuing their own lives.

In pre-historic times we were entirely dependent on nature for all our needs, such as food, clothing, building materials, fuel, and these were readily available in the world around us. Today we are *still* entirely dependent on nature for all our needs, though we can dig deeper (quite literally) to acquire them and our needs have been culturally transformed into insatiable desires.

We have spread ourselves so heavily on the land, pushed nature to the margins, cleared all that pointless vegetation for our great schemes, opened up the land for our great civilisation of light. Now as that city cracks and crumbles, we need to cover and protect again – Time for Trees!

Competing Cultures

Having lost so much woodland cover in Britain, both the protective mantle of actual trees and the cultural protection of a tree-based society, it is difficult to imagine how such a culture could emerge again, especially in the face of competing cultures. Other European countries, for example, have managed to retain both their trees and their woodland cultures to some extent.

In the West, our understanding of our world has been shaped by a series of detachments from the natural world: we diverted our attention away from our wild landscapes and companions and towards the written word. This happened around the time of Plato, when we exchanged the spell of the sensuous world for the spelling of words. Since then we have been literally sentenced to exile.

Greek philosophy then divided the material world from the ideal realm of Truth; then the Christian religion continued this by dividing Heaven from Earth; lastly the Scientific Revolution placed Man firmly in control and completed the conquest of nature, now seen as a machine of no intrinsic value. These beliefs have shaped our values and culture and influenced the path of our civilisation.

Developing a woodland culture will only be possible if other competing cultures are challenged, such as our dominant consumerism which favours “faster-bigger-cheaper”. The consumer culture seeks satisfaction / salvation in this life in the material world, spurred on by promises of ever-greater comfort, pleasure, security. Power and money, once means to

various ends, are now ends in themselves and the whole of the natural world and human life is monetised in order to generate profits for perpetual economic growth. The invention of the corporation created an impersonal profit-machine, disconnected from the people and places in which it operates, indifferent to the actualities of its processes and primarily interested in the bottom line.

Amidst all this, how can trees and woods become more valuable and meaningful for people again? In Britain an astonishing 83% of us live in urban areas. Can an overwhelmingly urban population develop a woodland culture? Perhaps because we are so urban we are beginning to miss our forest roots?

Our perceptions of loss are themselves prone to loss. Edward Thomas's poem 'First Known When Lost' recalls the familiar experience: "I never had noticed it until / 'Twas gone, - the narrow copse / Where now the woodman lops / The last of the willows with his bill". We notice sudden change more readily than the steady fabric of life around us. This is particularly felt with trees, which grow imperceptibly slowly, but can be felled in an instant. The absence of a familiar tree passed every day can be shocking each time it is (not) encountered – a kind of grief. But then our loss gradually fades, we grow accustomed to the change and it becomes the new normal. We need to pay more attention to the trees and woods around us, recognise their presence and fight to keep them.



Trees mean many different things to different people and there is a wide range of social constructions around trees – they can be anything from a source of timber, to ecosystem service providers, to an ideal state of nature, to living spirits. Trees *are* perennially meaningful to us and we need to develop that relationship in its many forms into robust action – both protection of our remaining trees and ambitious restoration of a treed landscape. Indeed, living with more trees in our lives can show us a deeper connection

with nature and help us to accept our rightful place in the web of life.

In the East, they retained a perception of the world as a web of life which included people. The human's purpose was to divine the correct path to maintain the harmony of the whole, to extend our compassion to the whole cosmos.

There are some promising signs, even in our modern western culture, and we will explore these below in a wide variety of contexts. The key issue is that some people are continuing to find value in woods, whilst others are rediscovering the abundant qualities of trees and woods and using them to enrich their lives.

Hierarchy of Values

In public policy documents, the 'economic, social and environmental' benefits of a project are often listed, as if these three criteria were somehow equal. They are sometimes described as the three legs of a stool - take one away and the project collapses.

But of course they are not three equal dimensions, they exist in a hierarchy: everything rests ultimately on the Earth, the living world, the environment, what we here call 'Nature'. Within the dazzling diversity of the living world there exists a sphere of activity called human society, with its families, feasts and celebrations. Then within this busy colony of human society there is a hive of activity called the economy, the bit where people exchange things. The economy is a sub-set of human society, which is a sub-set of the living world.

So a project or policy should not seek simply to meet economic, social and environmental criteria; it should first be assessed for its compatibility with the living world - does it promote the harmony of the whole and support life? Then human society - does it support a fair and just society? Finally the economic case - is it financially viable and can the proceeds be fairly shared? If not, is it worthy of our support? Re-ordering our priorities in this way would place nature at the centre of our hierarchy of values.

How might we make these cultural changes, realise that nature is the vessel we sail in, recognise the crucial importance of trees in the fabric of nature? How might we evolve a new woodland culture?

What do we think of our woods?

Gabriel Hemery eloquently summarises our contemporary woodland culture in *The New Sylva*, observing that although we surround ourselves with wooden artefacts, we feel unease at the sound of a chainsaw in the forest; and we import most of our timber while our own forests lie unmanaged. He concludes 'This is our woodland culture, and it is moribund'.

Recent history is instructive: in 2010 the UK Government floated the idea of selling off large parts of the State's forest holdings (that's the Forestry Commission woods). This stimulated a massive public backlash against the proposals and movements to 'save our forests'. The Government abandoned the plans and commissioned an independent panel to review the situation, led by the Bishop of Liverpool.

'What do forests and woods mean to you?' - so asked the **Independent Panel on Forestry** in May 2011. About half of the responses cited what might loosely be termed 'social values' to describe the meaning of woods to them – access, recreation, health, education, beauty. Another 31% said it was the environmental and wildlife aspects of the wood they valued – the ecological processes, wildlife and nature. Less than 8% thought that forests and woods meant 'economic benefits'.

The pressure group **38 Degrees**, who organised an online petition against the proposed sell-off of public forests, analysed their own members' demands and found that they were most concerned with three issues: that the forests remain in public ownership; that wildlife is protected; and that access is protected.



The **Forestry Commission** conducts its own biennial 'customer survey', the 'Public Opinion of Forestry'. In 2013 the most popular activity undertaken in woods was 'exercise', in the form of walking, running and cycling. Other popular activities include relaxing, thinking, playing, picnics, dog walking and watching nature. When asked about the most important purpose and use of woods and forests, people thought wildlife and recreation were top. Forests were rated much lower as contributors to the local economy. The 2017 survey confirmed that we see forests as places to relax, enjoy ourselves and keep fit, and woods for wildlife came top in the 2019 survey.

Woodland owners have also been asked about how they view their woods. A Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors survey in 2012 found that whilst the main objective for owning *land* was to generate income, the main objective for owning *woods* was for personal pleasure, followed by landscape conservation and biodiversity.

Towards a new 'Woodland Culture'?

What are we to conclude from all this? The threat of selling off state forests certainly stimulated an unforeseen outcry from the British public. It seems we do care what happens to 'our' forests – but why? The Independent Panel on Forestry thought we have lost sight of the value of trees and woods and sought to address this with a better assessment of their

ecosystem services. In the answers to these surveys, the general public and woodland owners appear to see forests and woods as places contributing to our quality of life and that of the natural world, but not as places of economic activity or value.

We seem to have a rather passive relationship with our woods and forests – they are places to go and do something else, pleasant surroundings for leisure. But we still react strongly to any threat of losing our woods and access to them.

Here we articulate a vision which puts human activity firmly within the embrace of nature. We have destroyed much of our natural home, but we believe we can learn to live within nature. We must restore what is damaged, support natural processes and re-acquaint ourselves with our erstwhile surroundings.

How do cultures grow in a society? By lots of people working collaboratively over a period of time; by interactions between people, places and things. For example, Common Ground organised the first Apple Day on 21st October 1990 and, through participation and repetition, that is now celebrated as an annual cultural event.



Axewoods Firewood Cooperative, East Devon

A new woodland culture is possible if enough people devote enough time, energy and attention to trees and woods. We need to value the trees we have and welcome more into our lives. We need to apprentice ourselves to our particular places and their ecological needs.

Why should it bother me if there are no woodpeckers or orchids round here any more? They may be 'nice to have', but how do they relate to our modern world of offices, supermarkets and motorcars?

Our economy has focused on maximising production of a few basic goods (eg. wheat, meat, mobile phones) and been very successful – but only on a short time scale and only by ignoring many of the inputs and outputs. Sure, a palm oil plantation is more 'productive' than the rainforest it replaces, but only if you count the dollars over a few years. It is an industrial production line focused on a specific item for sale. We raid our fossil past for fuel to live the present dream of unlimited consumption, whilst stealing the future from our children.

This linear model of production may work well for a few decades, or even centuries, until the inputs and outputs, which were previously ignored, start to demand attention: How much more rainforest can we convert? Is there anybody left living there in the forest? What about all those carbon emissions lost from the forest? How much more pollution can we dump? What has happened to the climate? This linear mode of thinking has brought the world to the brink of disaster.

We need to understand the world as an interconnected circular system, a web of interactions. All creatures and plants, all rocks and rivers, even we ourselves, are engaged in complex patterns of exchange and support; and the health and stability of the whole (eco-)system depends on the health and functioning of each part. Diversity is strength here and, whilst it is possible to maximise one component for a while, it is better to optimise all parts of the system for the long run.

So, although the woodpeckers and orchids may seem far removed from our busy lives, we are enmeshed with them in a living network, and their presence or absence is telling us something important about the state of the real world around us.

Climate Disruption

The future is not what it used to be... We have enjoyed a relatively stable climate in the current Holocene for about 12,000 years, enabling the development of extensive and complex ecosystems and civilisations. Climate is changing much more rapidly now than in previous millennia and trees growing from seeds today will mature many decades later in a significantly different climate. They will not be able to move to a more amenable climate and their offspring will not be able to migrate north fast enough to keep pace with projected climatic change.

The responses to this rapid climate breakdown need to be equally comprehensive and swift. The science tells us we *must* change; technology tells us we *can* change; it is now up to us to declare that we *will* change.. The main impacts of climate change on our forests in UK are warmer drier summers, wetter autumns and winters, higher risks from drought, wind and flood, increased risks of pests and diseases, and higher growth from increased CO₂ levels.

The warmer climate may favour some broadleaved trees in the north whilst making conditions too dry for others in the south and in marginal areas.

The composition of our current woods will change as some species gradually gain advantage over others under the emerging conditions. We already have a narrow range of species in our woods: just 5 conifers account for 88% of softwood forests and 5 hardwoods make up 72% of broadleaf woodland. Catastrophic events such as storms and fires will also affect our woods.

Helping our existing woods to **adapt** to a changing climate is tricky, both because we are unsure about the future climate and because woods take decades to grow and change. However, some steps appear to be useful: relieving other stresses, such as pollution, invasive species and over-grazing; ensuring good tree health and vitality; buffering and linking woods where possible to increase their core area. Opportunities for diversifying species, age and structure should be taken where possible, for example when restocking. Management should seek to conserve carbon stocks above and below ground and maintain humidity within the stand, so some form of continuous cover forestry would be more suitable than large clearfells.

Trees can also help **mitigate** the worst effects of climate breakdown: by absorbing CO₂ and holding it in their wood, whether living or in wooden products; by providing shelter and shade; by providing an energy source from current carbon, as opposed to fossil carbon. Planting new forests will help offset our carbon emissions and should be pursued extensively. The vast majority of the public (88%) agrees that a lot more trees should be planted in response to the threat from climate change.

Beyond these immediate considerations, climate breakdown is forcing us to reconsider what trees and woods are *for*. We have always thought of them primarily as providers of fuel and timber, places to graze animals, useful shelter from the elements. But now, as we find ourselves in a massively depleted world facing disruption of its functional dynamics, woods are being increasingly recognised for other vital functions; such as carbon storage and sequestration; moderators of water cycles, air quality and temperatures; stabilisers of landscapes; refugia for wild life. Indeed, these contributions may be more important than traditional uses in the decades ahead.

Finding a *modus vivendi* with trees

As a society, we have lost touch with trees. We misunderstand them and often mistreat them, not out of malice, but from lack of awareness. We have got used to having things our way and the rude intrusion of nature can seem like an affront, a nuisance to be quashed.

Whisper it quietly.... but not everyone likes trees! They can be difficult neighbours, getting in the way, never moving on, growing bigger all the time, dropping leaves where they are not wanted and fruits which get trodden to mush, blocking the view and the sun, rooting around in our drains and undermining our foundations. They also inspire fear – as individuals about to fall on us, and collectively as spooky havens of danger.

How can we live together? In his foreword to *In a Nutshell*, Richard Mabey describes that book as 'a guide to how we might join imaginative response with practical understanding to reach a modus vivendi with trees'.

We continue this work today, some 30 years later amidst changed circumstances: in the UK afforestation continues but slowly; the public has been shocked into greater awareness of trees and woods; woodland initiatives are springing up all over the place; but worldwide deforestation continues and the threats of climate breakdown and disease are ever more pressing.

There are wonderful examples of how people have forged new relationships with trees and woods, in towns and in the countryside, working repeatedly with wood, mud, saws and spades. These projects are exceptional - we want to see them springing up throughout the land so they become a normal part of our lives, in all sorts of woods and for all sorts of people, so we can create a new and diverse woodland culture.

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