

Woodland culture: oak festival in Belgium's Flanders helps rural residents to conserve the countryside

Trees are awarded cultural value in many parts of Europe and certain trees receive special protection as heritage monuments. Peoples' historical connections with such individual trees can be nurtured to create nature conservation benefits for a wider range of EU forest resources.



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'Forests for People'²⁹ was agreed by the United Nations as a central theme for its International Year of Forests in 2011. This aimed to highlight the value of forests in terms of their "economic and social relationship with humankind". A plethora of events were held under this 'Forests for People' banner on a worldwide scale to celebrate the International Year of forests 2011. These included actions which raised the profile of forests' cultural heritage value (as well as their environmental and other socio-economic benefits).

Forests serve a variety of cultural and symbolic functions. In Europe, for example, forests have been the subject of mythical legends or folk law and older woodlands are known to have strong ancestral links with rural areas' cultural heritage. Individual characteristics and histories associated with Europe's oldest tree specimens have led to some of them being protected by law.

Various reasons are associated with the cultural interest in historic trees. As survivors from the past, they may represent relicts of former landscapes and trees can also act as landmarks in history. Cases exist where Europe's older tree specimens are protected because they mark the sites of key cultural events like battles, societal meetings or political agreements. Even trees linked to incidents such as Newton discovering his gravity theory are protected.

Management of trees holding heritage value is promoted by the EU to reduce risks of their damage or loss. Raising awareness about the relationship between specific trees and local society can also help to secure support for the sustainability of a special tree from neighbouring communities. This type of support for trees as a rural heritage resource can attract financial assistance from the EAFRD, and Belgium's Flanders region has been the location of an example where the RDP helped to set up a project preserving ancient oak specimens.

Heritage conservation

Historic trees are known as Living Heritage (Levend Erfgoed) in the Flemish language and they form part of the Flanders region's cultural landscape. The EAFRD project in question targeted its support towards a Living Heritage tree in the province of Limburg. Here, near the village of Lummen in Lower Kempen, an old pollarded oak called locally the '1000 year old oak' (which is actually estimated to be approximately 700 years old) is growing. With a circumference that stretches nearly six and half meters in total, the '1000 year old oak' has been protected as a natural heritage monument in Flanders since 1940.

Despite its cultural relevance to the regional landscape, the old oak and hundreds of other pollarded oaks that were discovered in the area had fallen into neglect. The EAFRD project was

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