



FEATURE

The sacred yew and conservation efforts in the UK

by Fred Hageneder, Ancient Yew Group (UK)

Botany

There is no aspect of the botany of Taxus baccata, the yew tree, that is not unusual or even provocative to orthodox botanical systematics. It is a 'conifer' ('cone-bearing') that refrains from producing cones and instead lets a sweet succulent red aril develop around the seed ('baccata' means berry-like). Indeed Taxus always has occupied a realm of its own, not belonging to one of the two major groups of temperate trees, the evergreens and the broadleaves. The international redefinition of 'conifer' only managed to include yew in 2002.



Left: Foliage and fruits of Taxus baccata. Right: Old tree (shell) with interior trunk. Photos: F. Hageneder, P. Norton

Yew occurs naturally all around the northern hemisphere as scattered individuals or in groups in temperate forests, but in avoidance of hot, dry summers and cold winters it sticks to the maritime regions. Yew is the oldest native tree species of Europe, the genus goes back 15 million years, the predecessors date back to the Jurassic period.

It is an archaic tree with unique survival strategies. Among them are the ability to germinate and grow under extremely low light conditions, and even under such circumstances it already begins to invest predominantly into its root system. Yew's other safety mechanisms include the effective storage of resources, the toxicity and high resistance of its organs, the low photosynthesis performance, and an extraordinary speed of stomatal response. The ability to produce adventitious shoots from anywhere beneath the bark, and the capability of branch layering characterize an almost unique potential for regeneration. Measurements have shown that the bio-electrical currents in Taxus are higher than in any 'other' conifer (but lower than the summer values of broadleaves).

The most extraordinary feature, however, is that of interior roots. As the trunk of an old yew inevitably hollows out, the cambium produces roots that grow from the top of the trunk all the way down. Over centuries, such an interior growth can develop into a new trunk that progressively takes over the crown of the tree while the hollow shell of the original trunk drops away. Thus the tree can renew itself from the inside out. Needless to say, these phenomena render useless most efforts of dendrochronology to age an individual tree.

Religion

The Palaeolithic caves of southern Europe shelter not only the famous animal depictions, but also the 'branch motif', a term known to historians of early art. This depicts a twig with needles strikingly resembling those of yew. And the geography of this ancient art pattern is also congruent with the distribution maps of Taxus baccata.



Left: Neolithic birth symbolism with sacred branch (Jela, Serbia). Right: Madonna shrine inside the ancient yew at La Haye-de-Routot, France. Photo: T. Hills.

Mary as well as of Mary Magdalene, and the goddess of mercy Kuan Yin in China.

There are other striking parallels in yew lore. For example, in three different regions of Asia the indigenous name of yew translates as 'Tree of God' (Chvaebis che in Caucasian Georgia, deodarum in northern India, onco on Hokkaido, Japan). Also, in Japan and Ireland alike, the yew was instrumental in the inauguration of the mythical first dynasty of rulers.

Following all the leads in comparative religion, I made a case in my first yew monograph (2007) that this species is very likely to have inspired the mythology of the World Tree or Tree of Life. The ancient traditions relating to the World Tree (North American woodland tribes, Celtic Europe, Scandinavia, Iran, India, China, Japan) all originate from within the natural distribution zone of Taxus, something that cannot be said for the other botanical contenders.

Today, yew still plays a role in indigenous rites of passage among Pacific North America's First Nations, in Buddhist sanctuaries and Shinto shrines.

Conservation

Two major disasters are known to have struck the planetary yew population. The hunt for the medieval yew longbow made Taxus extinct in large regions of Europe (a scar from which Europe has not recovered even after 500 years), while the pharmaceutical rush for the yew's powerful anti-tumour agent raided most yew stands in North America during the 1980s and then continued in the Himalayas: India, for example, lost 90% of its yews between 1992 and 1998. Nowadays, gigantic plantations (cloned, which is ironic because naturally Taxus is characterized by unusually large genetic variety) meet most of the demand while the last remaining yew stands are on the Red List in many countries.

In Britain, for reasons unknown to us today, the old sacred tree of Celtic Wales and pagan Saxonia kept being planted in the churchyards of their Christian descendants. Many of those yews still thrive today: of the 1,280 veteran yews listed in the database of the Ancient Yew Group (AYG), 72% are located in churchyards. Their individual cultural histories, their wide spectrum of morphological plasticity and their gene pool make those trees a treasure that is unique in the world. They deserve World Monument status. But so far, they have no legal protection whatsoever.

In 2001, a small group of yew enthusiasts founded AYG, an independent research group which set out to advance the protection of this tree through research and education. We have shared yew knowledge through the books authored by myself and our website, which gives access to the yew database (thanks to the help of The Tree Register of the British Isles and to the Conservation Foundation). The website is highly frequented and since our founding year, yew consciousness has spread considerably. Invaluable has been the work of Caring for God's Acre, a small charity that raises general ecological awareness for churchyards and trains church staff as well as community members who participate in green activities therein. A milestone, moreover, has just been reached by the Church of Wales, by initiating this June a major campaign to protect 'one of Wales' oldest natural assets'. The AYG is currently devising a code of conduct for the careful stewardship of these ancient trees.

Neighbouring England, however, has not seen a government that is in the least committed to trees and forests of any kind since the millennium. The Church of England is sympathetic to ecology and yews in particular, but its mills grind slowly. Dangerously slowly, because the procedures in place to protect a venerable churchyard yew are still seen to fail. In Nov. 2011 an ancient yew at Ashford Carbonell was felled and every trace of its existence removed. Since it was located in a Conservation Area, the local council followed up the case relentlessly for several months and then suddenly dropped it, as it was discovered that the original Conservation Area plans might have been carried out incorrectly! This brought back haunting memories of a previous case in 2007 in which a vicar had instructed a gardener to fell a younger yew (c. 150/200 years old), located in a Conservation Area churchyard in south Wales. Because this was an illegal felling the local authority pursued the case, but it was dropped when realized that successful prosecution was unlikely, since it depended on 'admissible confessions or admissions from those suspected of involvement'.



The Ancient Yew Group. From left: Toby Hindson, Fred Hageneder, Russell Ball, Andy McGeeney, Tim Hills; inset: Paul Greenwood, Peter Norton.

PS from an 'indigenous European'

I admire the indigenous custodians of sacred places on the other continents, people who have inherited their position through a long line of ancestry. I am glad that the UN and other bodies finally begin to acknowledge such traditions and what our modern world can, and must, learn from them. What is often overlooked is that Europe has its indigenous people too. People who feel that all the Earth is sacred and all life deserves respect. While Western media and politics pride themselves with promoting 'integration' of minorities and other faiths, Europe's own natives don't seem to exist. They have been disintegration of their sacred natural sites, just like the tribal people elsewhere, only much earlier. It makes it difficult to stand up for our native Earth. But biophilia remains the key factor, 'our only pathway to survival, which is towards a future in which human and environmental health are inextricably linked' (Flannery, p.108).

References

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Hageneder, Fred, 2007. Yew – A History. The History Press, Stroud.  
Hageneder, Fred, 2013. Yew. Reaktion Books, London.

NEWS

Conference Tradition for the Future: Culture, Faith and Values for a Sustainable Planet held at Shinto shrine

Last June 2-4, a seminal event was held at Ise Jingu, the holiest Shinto shrine in Japan. For the first time ever in its 2,000 years of existence, the representatives of a number of religions from around the world were invited to visit the shrine and discuss how to protect the planet. Full story here.

EVENTS

July 20-24, Cairns, Australia  
51st Annual meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation: The Future of Tropical Biology and Conservation  
More info and registration here.

July 30-August 3, Cape Town, South Africa  
6th Conference of the African Association for the Study of Religion (AASR): Religion, Ecology, and the Environment in Africa and the African Diaspora  
The conference is co-sponsored by the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, and supported by the International Association for the History of Religions. More info here.

August 2-9, Star Island, NH, USA  
60th Anniversary Conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS): The Future of Science and Religion in a Globalizing World  
For more information and registration, please visit the conference website.

PUBLICATIONS

Baker, L.R., Olubode, O.S., Tanimola, A.A., Garshelis, D.L., 2014. Role of local culture, religion, and human attitudes in the conservation of sacred populations of a threatened 'pest' species. Biodiversity and Conservation 23: 1895-1909  
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UPCOMING EVENTS

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ON THE BOOKSHELF

List of relevant publications issued in the last three months

OPPORTUNITIES

September 1. Open call for symposia, short courses and focus groups  
27th International Congress for Conservation Biology and 4th European Congress for Conservation Biology

ABOUT SSIREN



The Sacred Site Research Newsletter (SSIREN) was conceived at the symposium "Conserving nature at sacred sites", held at the University of Zurich on the 25th October 2011, as a means to inform and aggregate the community of researchers working on sacred natural sites. It is aimed not merely at scholars but also practitioners and policy-makers coping with specific issues, as well as anyone with a general interest in the interaction between people and nature.

SSIREN is an acronym from the title Sacred Sites Research Newsletter, but as a creature a Siren is also a convincing symbol of the connection between beliefs, culture and nature, which is characteristic of sacred natural sites.

The Newsletter is issued quarterly and is literally "made" by its members: everyone is warmly encouraged to submit news, events, opportunities, and recent relevant publications, or to introduce their work in a feature article. Relevant contributions from all academic disciplines, as well as NGO practitioners and other institutions, are warmly welcome.

All past issues of SSIREN are currently hosted by the Sacred Sites Research Initiative's website and are available for download.

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FRIENDS



SANASI – World Database on Sacred Natural Sites



ARC – The Alliance of Religions and Conservation



ISSRNC – The International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture



SNSI – The Sacred Natural Sites Initiative



CSVPA – IUCN-WCPA Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas

OPPORTUNITIES

1 September  
27th International Congress for Conservation Biology (ICCB) and the 4th European Congress for Conservation Biology (ECCB)  
Open call for symposia, short courses and focus groups  
The joint congress, organized by the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB), will be held on August 2-6, 2015 in Montpellier, France, and have the theme Mission Biodiversity: Choosing new paths for conservation. Preliminary information is already available at the congress website.



We warmly invite the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale and Alliance of Religions and Conservation for their precious updates and contributions to this newsletter

You receive this newsletter because you have previously participated in initiatives on sacred natural sites. Tired of it? Please contact the Editors. Think it's fantastic and would like to involve a colleague or a friend? Contact the Editors all the same.