

CHAPTER TEN

TREE VENERATION: HOW ANCIENT TRADITIONS CAN LEAD TO PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOUR

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Introduction

Today, sparked by indisputable proof of human agency in climate change, the environment is in the center foreground. It has become the radical edge. But the handle on that edge remains the land itself, how we see, understand, use and respond to it. (Lippard 2006:14; Fowler-Smith 2018: 261)

In 2003, I made my first field trip to India to research sacred trees and tree groves and continued to do so over the following ten years. Initially attracted to the enchanting beauty of these trees, I became committed to their study after learning that the veneration of the tree has the ability to protect trees from logging (Fowler-Smith, 2018: 262). In Hindu cultures tree veneration through adornment demarcates the tree as set apart and special, inviting people to place further decorative items as offerings and glorifications to the gods. This broadens the way society approaches the tree with the aesthetic enhancement enabling a change of consciousness and the transformation of the tree into a sacred object, contributing to its protection. As Lucy Lippard has argued above, how people see or perceive the land influences how they respond to it and this relationship is of especial importance in times of ecological crisis (Fowler-Smith, 2018: 262).

To further engage with the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in the conservation of trees, upon my return to Australia I founded an eco-arts collective called the Tree Veneration Society Inc. (TVS), an environmentally focused artistic collective that honours the beauty, power and the importance of trees. As stated on the Tree Veneration Society website (<https://treevenerationsociety.com>):

The Tree Veneration Society aims to re-contextualise the historical practice of the worship and veneration of trees across nearly all cultures into a progressive contemporary community art project. While being environmentally conscious of the value of trees, particularly in inner-city suburbs, they also hope to bring some sense of the ritual created in forming a cross-cultural celebration of nature.

This chapter briefly explores the tradition of the veneration of trees in India and outlines how this field research led to the formation of an eco-artist collective, The Tree Veneration Society Inc. (TVS). It provides an example of how participatory artforms can help to encourage pro-environmental behaviour (and in this case, an emotional affinity with trees) when combined with celebratory events and educational programs.

Why are trees important?

We know that trees are important to life on this planet. They are vital to the condition of humankind and are symbolic of the health of the community. They produce the oxygen that we breathe, making them vital to our existence and act as giant filters, absorbing pollutants such as carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide from the air — preventing greenhouse gas from being emitted into the atmosphere. Similarly, trees clean the soil from dangerous chemicals and pollutants by either storing or changing the pollutant into something more benign. This is why the cleanest water may be found running through our forests. Every tree could be described as a water column, providing the air with a constant supply of moisture (Hageneder, 2000: 27).

A tree, we might say, is not so much a thing as a rhythm of exchange, or perhaps a centre of organisational forces. Transpiration induces the upward flow of water and dissolved materials, facilitating an inflow from the soil. If we were aware of this rather than the appearance of a tree-form, we might regard the tree as a centre of a force-field to which water is drawn ... The object to which we attach significance is the configuration of the forces necessary to being a tree ... rigid attention to boundaries can obscure the act of being itself. (Evernden, 1997: 199)

Trees contribute to the stabilisation of soil temperature. Their root systems can stop soil erosion and the build-up of sediments after storms and create a water reservoir for all plants that exist around them. The dropping of leaves provides a nutrient-rich habitat for countless species of animal and plant life. Trees shade us in the heat and act as windbreaks against cold

winds. They influence the temperature and humidity of the air through their absorption and evaporation of rain, contributing to a balanced water table. Trees even contribute to the electrical and magnetic forces that are fundamental to the balance of nature, both through their own energetic charges and by connecting to those around them — from the soil, air, humans, even the planets (Hageneder, 2000: 32).

In Japan there is a term ‘shinrin-yoku’ — forest bathing — coined by the Japanese Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in 1982 to mean the state of being in contact with and taking in the atmosphere of the forest. A Japanese marine chemist, Katsuhiko Matsunaga, has discovered that when leaves decompose, humic acid seeps into the ocean, helping with the fertilisation of plankton which in turn feeds many forms of sea life. As a result of this discovery, Japanese fisherman began a campaign called ‘Forests are the lovers of the sea’, by planting trees along coastlines and rivers (Robbins, 2013: 20). Research undertaken on the relationship between forests and human health found that among people who gazed on forest scenery for 20 minutes, the average concentration of salivary cortisol, a stress hormone, was 13.4 percent lower than that of people in urban settings (Rutter, 2013: 11). Spending time in a forest has been shown to reduce stress in the body and increase cells in the immune system that fights tumours and viruses (Robbins, 2013: 20). Numerous tree compounds have been shown to be antibacterial, anti-fungal, anti-viral and anti-cancer, for example Taxane from the Pacific yew tree is a powerful anti-cancer drug. There are hundreds of other chemicals that are emitted by trees that are beneficial to humanity.

Forestry researchers have discovered that trees are more like us than we have ever imagined. In his book *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*, Peter Wohlleben (2018), drawing on the research of Suzanne Simard, tells us that trees in the forest are communicative beings. Trees are able to warn each other of danger by sending electrical signals across a fungal network that surround their roots, nicknamed the ‘Wood Wide Web’. They can keep the ancient stumps of long-felled companions alive for centuries by feeding them a sugar solution through their roots, at the same time as nursing sick neighbours back to health. Trees can also warn each other of impending danger by releasing a scent. If an animal or insect starts to feed on a tree it will emit toxic substances through its leaves that repels its predator. The tree then lets the neighbouring trees of the same species know about the danger by emanating a gas that signals the need to pump a similar toxin into their own leaves. Collectively, trees can create an ecosystem that enables them to grow, heal, and live for a very long time. The oldest to date is Old Tjikko, a spruce that has been growing and regenerating in Sweden for over 9,500 years! (Wohlleben, 2018:32).

I know I am not alone as a lover of trees. As kids we would climb them. The feeling of being above adults and the world they represent enticed us to build our own houses in their branches. Omnipresent and in their millions, they framed the sky. Little pockets of light shone through their leaves. We would gather under their boughs to escape the harsh summer sun, and to plan our next move. Growing up I spent many wonderful days on my father's farm near the Barrington Tops region of New South Wales in Australia. In my teenage years one of my favourite activities was to climb the highest hill on the farm and sit under a patch of large gum trees while watching the sun disappear on the horizon. These trees seemed to possess a wisdom or a sense of knowing. They had witnessed more than any person, certainly more than I had. In my mind they were beautiful, grand, living beings, deserving of great respect.

Some people find trees annoying. They drop their leaves, make a mess in the backyard, and fill up the gutters, causing all sorts of problems. People chop them down, then pave their backyard completely to ensure control. One day, still a child, I travelled to some distant paddocks with my father and a local farmer. As we stood in the field the farmer pointed to a copse of trees on his land, which had been predominantly cleared and said, 'I gotta get rid of that vermin.' Thinking that he was referring to some field rats I asked where these vermin were, to which he responded that he was referring to the trees. Rather than seeing them as vital parts of the environment, holding the soil together and providing nutrients and shade amongst so many other things, this man perceived them as pests and resented their 'invasive' presence.

My discovery of the veneration of trees

Many years after this experience with the farmer, in 2003 I made my first trip to India at the invitation of my sister. She was aware of my interest in trees and when she saw an adorned sacred tree in Tamil Nadu, she made some enquiries and discovered that this practice occurs over many parts of the country. She spoke of how people would adorn trees with a variety of decorative items and conduct rituals around the trees in different parts of the country. Intrigued, I decided to travel to India to see for myself. I was aware of ancient traditions in parts of Europe where people would tie cloth on the branches of certain trees, often for luck, and was expecting something similar. I had no idea how diverse, widespread and profoundly beautiful the sites I was about to discover would be, and that I would spend the next ten years of my life focused on a journey to discover sacred venerated trees (Figure 1).

The first time I came across a group of venerated trees in India I was struck by their transformation (see Figure E – colour section). The trees, covered with golden yellow turmeric powder and turmeric roots enhanced my perception of what was an otherwise normal grouping of trees set amid the bush land, to encompass a sense of reverence and enchantment. This grouping of trees formed a tree temple devoted to fertility and marriage where women come to perform a ritual in the wish for a husband (Fowler-Smith, 2009: 43).

Over the years I have interviewed many devotees who were making offerings to these trees. When asked what they perceived when I pointed to the venerated tree, they did not respond that they saw an inanimate tree that could easily be chopped down – instead, they saw their god or their temple which housed their god. This form could never be destroyed and they recited stories of roads having to be re-routed in order to protect the tree.



**Figure 1: Venerated Tree to Fertility and Marriage, Arunachala, T.N.
Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith, 2008.**

Having had a fascination for trees for many decades I had read about tree worship in ancient times. In the nineteenth century the scholar James Frazer became fascinated by the symbolic importance of trees, in classical

mythology and in numerous ancient civilisations and religions across time. He believed that all ancient religions originated in the personification of nature, which was evident in the practice of tree worship (Rival, 2001: 4). Religious studies scholar Mircea Eliade found this such a prevalent theme across religions he described the tree as the *axis mundi* or centre of the world, joining the realms of the human to those beyond. Before the advent of Christianity, the community's elders, seers, shamans or priests consecrated certain parts of the woodland. People only visited these sacred groves for prayer, meditation or thanksgiving. The Celtic and Germanic tribes always worshipped in the sacred groves and did not feel the need to build temples. In the early Druidic/Celtic alphabet, known as Ogham or the Tree Alphabet, each letter takes the name of a tree (Mountfort, 2002: 16). The word 'tree' means 'learning' in all Celtic languages and there was a strong association between trees and knowledge. Tree worship, however, ceased with the rise of monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, which preached that there could only be one God (Hageneder, 2000: 56). These gradually replaced beliefs in which the Earth was understood as the Great Goddess and Mother, which had enabled a close connection to nature.

A stark contrast to the universal decline of tree worship may be found in Hindu Cultures, and particularly in India. Hinduism accepted local cults from ancient times, many of which were animist (nature worshippers). The Rsis, authors of the sacred Hindu texts, understood the importance of preserving the environment, and reference is made to the divine quality of the natural world throughout these Indian scriptures. The early Hindu sacred texts, the Vedas and Upanishads, make frequent reference to sacred trees, referring to them as the most important living forms on earth because of their ability to give oxygen, food, medicine and shade. The Indian tradition of venerating the Tree can be traced back to 5,000—3,500BC through inscriptions made by the proto-Dravidian inhabitants, known as Hamites of the Indus Valley. It was the Hamites who spread the tradition of the Tree of Life through the Mediterranean and eventually to Egypt. The Tree of Life appears in the first Sanskrit writings of India, with the earliest reference being made in a Dravidian document. It is found growing in heaven for the first time at Mohenjo Daro and in the Rgveda (Heras, 1944: 459).

Sacred Trees may be found throughout India to this day, with the veneration of the tree actively being pursued as a contemporary practice. Trees are considered to represent the Gods, often because it is believed their spirits reside in them. They are thus considered the natural embodiment of the divine. Nearly every Indian tradition holds a profound respect for trees. They are worshipped by tribal animistic peoples and hold places of honour at Hindu and Buddhist Temples, Sufi Shrines, Catholic Churches and Jain Temples.

After years of field research in India I remembered my experience with the farmer in Australia and reflected on the difference between the farmer's perception of the tree and that of devotees in India. It became obvious that the difference was based on perception. How we perceive and contemplate the land affects how we treat the land, and ultimately how we live on it. We are less likely to honour and respect the land if we see it as separate from ourselves. This perception remains pertinent irrespective of how the land is managed across cultural divides.

These encounters led me to consider that the sacred aesthetic of the venerated trees played a considerable role in the broader preservation of the environment. Through religious acts of decoration, the tree is an object adorned and adored (Fowler-Smith, 2018: 262). The tree, once aesthetically enhanced, becomes something other than a 'tree'. It can become a home for the sacred, a representation of the sacred, and in itself becomes protected and demarcated from the 'mundane' — attaining the status of sacred in its own right. To walk through the natural environment and stumble across one of these transformed trees can be a profound experience, one that involves all the senses and is available to all, regardless of nationality, tradition, or faith position (Fowler-Smith, 2009: 44).

Although people around the world are becoming more vocal about the protection of trees and forests, deforestation is still occurring at an alarming rate. We are living in a time that has been declared a climate emergency. An article that appeared in *The Guardian Weekly* in 12 July 2019: 'Tree Planting has mind blowing potential to tackle climate crisis', declared the cheapest and biggest way to tackle the climate crisis is to plant a trillion trees. It has become obvious, however that governments cannot be relied upon to adequately protect the natural environment and alternative agents of change need to be found.

Formation of the Tree Veneration Society

There are many communities on the planet who perceive the tree as an auspicious form to be venerated and protected. It is this broadening of the perception of the tree that interests me. Inspired by my field research in India in 2010 I founded an eco-art collective called The Tree Veneration Society (TVS) to encourage a focus on the importance of trees in our environmentally challenged world. This is an environmentally focused creative collective that intends to foster a transcultural space for the adoration of trees in a variety of communities. TVS aims to re-contextualise the historical practice of the sacredness and veneration of trees across nearly all cultures into progressive contemporary community art projects. It recently gained charity status.

We pondered on how we could help people to change their perception of trees, without attaching religious connotations. For some people the tree is viewed as an inanimate form which could easily be removed without compunction — an annoyance or something that blocked their view. We explored modes of perception from a cross-cultural perspective to show instances where a changed perception of the natural environment can influence the overall protection of that same environment at a grass root level.

Since 2010, TVS has undertaken public art projects for a variety of communities, including refugee communities through Settlement Services International. Initially motivated to draw attention to the tree from cross cultural perspectives and inspired by what I had witnessed in India, we transformed otherwise normal looking trees through aesthetic enhancement, for example Figures 2 to 5.



Figure 2: Tree Veneration Project at the Chippendale Childcare Centre, Sydney, 2011. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith.

We contributed to the annual artistic Beams Festival in Sydney from 2012 to 2016 (Figures 3 to 6) where we transformed trees to become sites of beauty, awe, enchantment or wonder. People were encouraged to fantasise, to hug, to be transformed and to learn about trees, and in some instances to interact (for example through drawing, as shown in Figure 6).



Figure 3: The Avatar Tree. Beams Festival Sydney, 2015. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith.



Figure 4: The Hugging Tree. Beams Festival, Sydney, 2013. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith.



Figure 5: The Information Tree. 2013 Beams Festival. Photograph: Jane Green.



Figure 6: Drawing the Shadow Tree. Beams Festival, Sydney, 2016. Photograph: Liz Perfect.

Not wanting to be known purely as tree decorators we started to explore alternative ways to encourage a changed perception of the tree. We developed an interactive, performative series of workshops for the Sydney Science Festival that allow people to ‘Get to know a tree via all of the senses’. We produced a brochure which asks:

Have you ever wondered how trees “breathe”? Or how they get water to their leaves? Did you know that we get medicine and food from trees? What other exciting things do trees do, and how important are they to us? Come and explore trees in new ways with the Tree Veneration Society, a group of environmentally aware artists and scientists who strongly believe that trees are the most important life form on the planet. Through interactive and creative workshops, learn about trees in innovative ways such as animation, storytelling, art and the use of technology. Use your phone to look closely at the epidermis of leaves (that’s the skin) or delve underneath the trees’ acoustic surface to listen to the water rising to the leaves. We will explore trees not only through our eyes and ears, but also through our noses, tongues and fingers.

Based on a workshop that I developed, participants are invited to listen to the inner workings of a tree and to the sound of water being drawn up from the soil to its leaves, as in Figure 7.



Figure 7: Listening to the inner workings of the Tree. Sydney Science Festival, Centennial Park, 2016. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith.

Thanks to the research of TVS member Paula Broom, participants can study different aspects of a tree at a microscopic level and in some instances even see the tiny stomata in the epidermis of a leaf. We then enhance this experience by lending willing citizen scientists a special lens, called an Olloclip (who have sponsored TVS), which they can attach to their phone and explore the surrounding plants and trees. Through social media their photographs provide a sense of wonder for a broad audience, beyond the people who were attracted to attend the workshop. Examples of this workshop can be seen in Figures 8 and 9.



Figure 8: Seeing Through magnification on our phones. Sydney Science Festival, Royal Botanical Gardens, Sydney, 2019. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith.



Figure 9: Seeing through magnification. Waverley Council National Tree Day. Sydney, 2017. Photograph: Paula Broom.

Children and their admiring parents enjoy the workshop developed by TVS member Liz Perfect, where they can fine tune their perception of trees and plants by drawing and making frottages, thus taking the time to really see, feel and learn about barks and leaves, as can be seen in Figures 10 and 11.



Figure 10: Learning about tree textures through frottage and drawing. Sydney Science Festival, Centennial Park, Sydney 2018. Photograph: Liz Perfect.

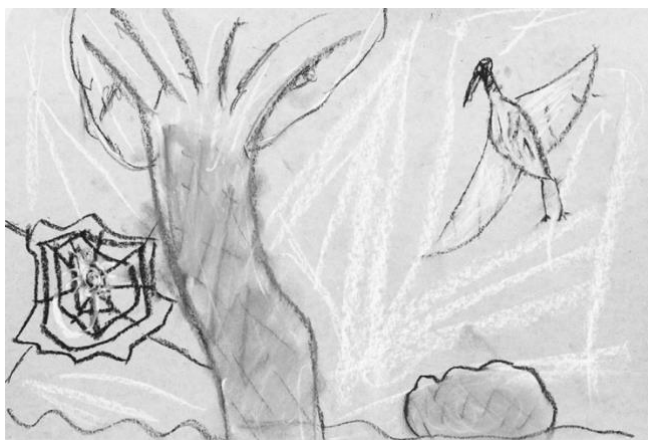


Figure 11: Child's Drawing. Sydney Science Festival. Centennial Park, Sydney, 2016. Photograph: Liz Perfect.

The sense of touch is enhanced by making 'Tree Creatures' from the discarded products of trees and plants – twigs, leaves, bark, etcetera – through weaving, twining and constructing, developed by TVS member Amanda Farquharson (Figures 12 and 13).



Figure 12: Learning through touch. Sydney Science Festival. Royal Botanical gardens, Sydney, 2019. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith.



Figure 13: ‘Tree Creature’ — Learning through Touch workshop. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith, 2016.

The sense of smell and taste are covered by a workshop developed by TVS members Sue Stevens (see Chapter 11 of the current volume), Elizabeth Gervay and Jane Green, by offering teas and displaying products from trees and plants that are used as medicines and food, amongst so many other uses that plants and trees provide (Figure 14).



Figure 14: Workshop on smell, taste and utility. Settlement Services International, Auburn Centre for Community. Sydney, 2018. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith.

We teach about how trees operate in the world through storytelling and via the medium of animation, as offered by TVS member Hobart Hughes (Figure 15). Titled ‘Water and The Tree’ Hobart uses animation to demonstrate the inside visual story of how water moves from the ground

through the roots, trunk, limbs and finally to the leaves. He discusses the gravity defying physics of the tree.



Figure 15: TVS member Hobart Hughes discussing his animation. Sydney Science Festival, Royal Botanical Gardens, Sydney, 2019. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith.

We also reveal some of the most recent scientific research that brings to light how trees are able to communicate with each other through mycorrhizal fungal networks and are more like us than we previously imagined, as mentioned above. Developed by TVS member Kassandra Bossell (see Chapter 21 of the current volume), participants explore and discuss the dynamics of the mutualistic association between trees and mycorrhizal fungi. Using locally sourced organic materials, they build sculptures of the main trunks of two or three trees and then extend branches up to a shared canopy and roots down to meet the shared mycorrhizal network. Canopies and nets are then sewn together or wired together using recycled / upcycled materials.



Figure 16: Mycorrhizal fungal networks workshop. Sydney Science Festival, Royal Botanical Gardens, Sydney, 2019. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith.

One of our newest workshops was developed by TVS members, Dr Marlien Van Der Merwe and Dr Hannah McPherson, both research scientists at the Royal Botanical gardens in Sydney. Participants are able to experience a variety of forests or bushland by going on a walk in the

Botanical gardens which takes them from a mini rainforest, through Australian bushland to a desert environment. In each of these environments Dr Van Der Merwe and Dr McPherson reveal why plants have evolved and adapted to their individual environments.



Figure 17: Image from the Tree Adaptation walk. Sydney Science Festival, Royal Botanical Gardens, Sydney, 2019. Photograph: Louise Fowler-Smith.

More recently I have been investigating relatively new research that suggests that trees can learn and even have a memory. Contemporary scientist, Monica Gagliano, in her book *Thus Spoke the Plant* (2018) asks us to change our perception of plants and trees from forms that lack

intelligence or agency to sentient beings that have the ability to hear, see, smell feel, taste and are able to learn and even remember.

How do we reveal this new wisdom to the world at large in creative and engaging ways? I see this as the next challenge for the Tree Veneration Society, amongst others.

Conclusion

Returning to the words of contemporary writer and environmentalist, Lucy Lippard, with which this article opened: in the contemporary era the environment has become a critical issue, with importance being placed on how humans view, understand, use, and respond to the environment. Many spiritual traditions offer possible ways to establish a relationship between humans and the natural world based on mutual respect rather than the manipulation and exploitation attitude evident in current behavioural paradigms. If people see trees as separate from humans, they are less likely to honour and respect them, but through the dual process of adornment and adoration, they become beacons for the recognition of the environment as something that necessarily connects the human and the non-human (Fowler-Smith, 2018: 282).

The Tree Veneration Society Inc., is a conduit to promoting trees as part of the world community, promoting understanding and care of the environment. Over the years since its formation, this eco-arts collective has offered a variety of workshops, interactive exhibitions and events incorporating participatory artforms. Through these activities, the Society has been able to reach numerous cross-cultural communities that may not normally attend an art exhibition and have witnessed people express delight, enchantment and a changed perception of the tree. The Tree Veneration Society Inc. represents an example of how the arts can lead to pro-environmental behaviour at a grass roots level.

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