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Ancient Woods, Trees and Forests

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This richly illustrated and very attractively produced book offers an original perspective to forestry research and to the debate on the management and conservation of ancient woods, trees and forests, showing its value for a number of experts including landscape planners, foresters, conservationists, educators as well as for the general public. Drawing upon a solid tradition of forestry studies, mainly in the British context and benefiting from the contribution of some of the most eminent scholars in the field, the editors bring together key research and writers from across Europe and beyond. The study of ancient woods, trees and forests benefits from a multidisciplinary approach which involves natural and social sciences but also humanities. The diverse background of contributors of the book includes foresters, biologists, ecologists, conservationists, landscape historians, landscaper planners, historians, geographers and palaeoecologists. A first edition of this book was published in 2017 with the support of IUFRO (International Union of Forest Research Organisations). This expanded volume is dedicated to the memory of the late Professor Oliver Rackham OBE and to Professor Melvyn Jones who are also listed amongst the authors of the book.

The cultural and historical significance of ancient trees, woods and forests and their deep connection with cultures and societies around the world is known to readers of this journal but tends to be overshadowed at public opinion level by a new ‘green’ paradigm which separates humans from nature neglecting, if not condemning, all sorts of human interference on ‘natural’ habitats. As argued in the Preface by the editors, there is hardly any place in the world where people have not managed the land and transformed its ecologies. Ancient trees, woods and forests are characterised and shaped by a complex series of relations between organisms of different nature where people’s multiple uses and practices have played a crucial role in their development and survival. Therefore, the aim of the book is to foster a greater understanding of the web of connections relating to ancient trees and woodlands and to offer techniques to ensure effective conservation and sustainability of this precious resource. The chapters are diverse in terms of structure, objectives and content, some are more methodological or focus on important sources, others develop important themes or geographical case studies in depth. Very importantly, the authors provide definitions of ancient woodland showing how the concept has regional differences that also depend on the scientific, academic and cultural context. The great variety of themes and subjects is one of the strengths of the book, which is organic in terms of general aims and contents (albeit only occasionally a bit repetitive), but it provides clear evidence of the various

ways in which such an interdisciplinary theme can be studied and analysed. Depending on the themes and subjects, the chapters deal with a number of different research questions which can be summarised as follows: How can ancient woods, trees and forests be studied and managed? Why are they culturally and historically significant? What is their value in current conservation and biodiversity management policies? What is their past and present economic importance?

The way contemporary wooded landscapes look is the result of centuries of past agro-silvo-pastoral practices with strong regional differences that persist today and can be recognised and identified. Depending on environmental but also economic and social conditions, in recent decades wooded landscapes went through processes of land use changes which include rewilding, deforestation and modern forestry management. Such modifications often result in the normalisation of what was once a rich and diverse landscape where the wealth of uses and practices was beneficial to both people and biodiversity. What is common to most of chapters of the book is the importance of a local scale, almost topographical or even archaeological approach where the 'biography' of individual landscapes can benefit from multisource research methods. In this perspective, the field is undeniably the best source of information to the study of ancient woods, trees and forests as, by quoting Rackham (Chapter 3, p. 69), 'even in the best-documented places, writings alone, without fieldwork, do not tell a complete story'. This is very true of many chapters of the book, which discuss research techniques in the field and individual case studies by looking at landscape and terrain evidence. These can be plants known as ancient woods indicators, specific trees species of specimens with singular shapes (old pollards and coppice stools) or very old, hedgerows, remnant charcoal pits, kilns, ore furnaces, old boundary stones, bark barns, etc. When conducting fieldwork, several contributors use photographs to preserve a 'snapshot' of a particular object or location in a specific moment in time. Other methodologies involved in the study of ancient woods are dendrochronology (the analysis of trees annual growth rings) and pollen analysis (palynology, very useful to document past landscape structures, see Chapter 14 on Denmark by Anne Brigitte Nielsen).

Data from the field need to be integrated with a wide range of historical documents including written accounts and travel sources (even very old ones, see the rich analysis of historical written sources on Anatolia forestry history in Chapter 13 by Kirca, Çolak and Rotherham), oral history and iconographical sources. Another strength of the book is the large corpus of high-quality, colour pictures that are common to most of the chapters. These include historical cartography (useful in the analysis of old place names and to study landscape history) and current maps produced with GIS in order to show specific locations and landscape features. Topographical views of particular sites and landscapes (in the form of prints and drawings) and historical photographs are

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widely used in some chapters, either to document landscape changes (see for example Chapter 11 by Elizabeth Johann) and to provide evidence of specific woodland management uses and practices (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 7 by Ian Rotherham). Overall, the use of art and photography documents the cultural and historical significance of treescapes in the European context.

The book offers a very valuable contribution to ancient woods, trees and forests management and conservation in the context of current forestry policies in Britain in Europe, considering crucial issues including climate change, trees diseases, land abandonment and rewilding. One very important argument that emerges from many chapters is that there is no such thing as ‘primeval’ or ‘natural’ forest, and that ancient woods and trees should be valued in their own right for cultural and historical features. This does not mean that we should set aside semi-natural forests in strictly protected areas to facilitate natural dynamics, but, where possible, the re-establishment of traditional forest management techniques (including grazing) can be functional to managing wooded landscapes that are the results of centuries of human–nature relations. Oliver Rackham’s almost provocative list of ‘tenets of modern forestry’ (Chapter 3, pp. 42–43) explains why today trees and forests are treated almost like ‘a farmland crop’ where the only purpose is the production of timber. This modern paradigm neglects traditional management practices that have shaped diverse treescapes in Europe as well as around the world. Modern forestry excludes grazing and use of fire and promotes monoculture and trees of the same shape and dimensions.

Evidence from the wealth of themes and case studies of the book shows the benefits that traditional management of ancient trees, woods and forests have for nature and biodiversity and for society. In terms of biodiversity, open woodlands and wood-pastures often allow a higher biodiversity level than closed-canopy high forest, particularly with regard to many plant and animal species (for example butterflies) that require light and live in habitat where grassland, scrub and groves are combined with mantle vegetation. As extensively shown in the book (see for example Chapter 12 by Frans Vera) grazing by both domestic and wild herbivores is a key driver of structure and ecology of open wood pasture. In such environments, single trees, often impacted by livestock, can develop attractive shapes, show full lateral branch development or grow considerably, offering multiple structures on their surface and serving as habitats for a number of organisms including epiphytes, fungi and small animals. Similarly, deadwood and decaying old-growths are key factors for nature conservation as they offer plenty of habitat structures and increase Natural Capital (see Chapter 10 by Schaich et al.). Many authors, however, notice how, despite the value of such environments for nature and biodiversity, there is a lack of specific legislation at both European and national level.

Finally, the book provides evidence of the social and economic value of ancient woods, trees and forests and their importance for the public as elements of

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heritage interest and local identity. Çolak, Kirka and Rotherham's fascinating Chapter 17 on the Sandras Mountain (Turkey) shows how cultural landscapes (including treescapes) also have profound significance for the local population in terms of religion and traditional customs. There is great potential for community engagement and citizen science projects where people are directly involved in surveys. Chapter 6 by Jill Butler introduces the Ancient Tree Hunt promoted by English Nature (today Natural England), where the general public was involved in mapping what they considered as the most valuable trees in the UK landscape.

Overall, the book is provoking, easily readable and stimulating, and a welcome addition to forestry studies under an environmental and historical perspective. The combination of scientific rigour and generally clear and concise language and the widespread use of high-quality images will make it of interest for the general public and a valuable text for university classes in environmental history, forestry and geography classes. It is also hoped that *Ancient Woods, Trees and Forests* will contribute to raising awareness and improve the understanding, management and conservation of such unique elements of our cultural heritage.

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