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THOUGHTS ON THE POLITICS AND ECONOMICS OF URBAN STREET TREES

Ian D. Rotherham

Summary

Street trees, and especially urban street trees, provide major services to people and places. They generate local character and distinctiveness and add value to properties, and increase the desire to live or work in a particular locale. Not only that but they improve quality of life and they benefit human health. We even know now that these trees help climate-proof our urban centres by lowering summer temperatures up to several degrees, by attenuating storm-generated runoff and minimising flood risk, and by removing particulates and other pollutants from the city atmosphere.

But such urban street trees are at risk and with likely cuts in UK local government services, the threats will soon increase dramatically. These trees, especially in an urban environment are stressed and require care and attention and their champions are often local government tree officers. This provision of service costs money and necessitates well-qualified professional support. However, observations in a number of conurbations over thirty years or more, and discussions with senior tree officers, suggests that local government and other responsible bodies often prefer to remove trees which they deem to be problematic. Generally this means those now mature forest trees that were planted by Victorian and Edwardian developers. This action is in order to minimise maintenance costs, to avoid damage to pavements, and to resolve other potential problems that officers, elected members, or the public associate with the older and bigger trees. Of course in urban areas there is the additional problem that these big trees were not planted in optimum conditions and the ambient environmental stresses sometimes but by no means always lead to premature decline.

There are many examples of excellent practice in urban street tree management but one worries about the future in a DIY 'Bigger Society' scenario. Professional practice must be maintained even in the face of intransigent economic issues affecting both public and private sectors. The marked decline in arboricultural practitioners taking up options of professional training is a clear indication of the depth of the economic impacts of the downturn. However, it is argued that these trees bring huge benefits to a community and to a conurbation and

that this includes enhanced economic prosperity. The problem with this is that the costs are borne by local government which is increasingly cash-strapped, but the benefits which accrue are to local business and to the community at large. The cost and the benefits are not placed with the same organisation and so to transfer the financial incentive to maintain the resource there needs to be a movement of tax revenues to the service provider. This is not what central government will wish to hear.

Introduction

It is absolutely clear that street trees and particularly urban street trees have great value. It is also obvious that much of the value cannot be given a price. Indeed, attempts to place a value and especially a price on street trees are especially problematic. As editor of a major journal which addresses these issues, and having helped to chair international meetings at which methodologies and approaches were discussed, I have observed the tensions and passions which run deep in such dialogues. It is possible to place a monetary value on a tree and its contribution to an amenity, and hence a price for any replacement cost. Approaches such as that of Helliwell have also been tested through due legal process and the findings upheld.

But when we talk of street trees we are dealing with much more than trying to attempt to assess a compensation-based approach to loss of amenity. How we accommodate a valuation system which fairly appraises aspects such as local heritage and distinctiveness of place, of wildlife habitat, and of community '*ownership*' of a particular locale, is, to put it mildly, very difficult. Some such trees may be several hundred years old and in effect are irreplaceable; their value is incalculable but they are certainly not worthless. This short paper considers the issues and underlying trends. The detailed evidence is in the sources given in the Bibliography.

Big trees also present significant insurance risks and debates ensue in the professional and legal literature about what constitutes reasonable professional competence for tree conditions survey and assessment. With society often seemingly obsessed with a culture of blame, litigation and compensation risks and not benefits of big trees have become the norm. In recent years the approach has become more pragmatic but this is still a subject which worries landowners and their agents should their trees present a hazard. For individual householders in an urban setting this is a serious worry. However, most local people love their trees and their removal is often without consultation and done by stealth; raising major issues of local democracy and community engagement.

Yet there are additional complications in this debate when local authority officers and elected members describe the big forest trees as unsuitable for urban environments. Firstly it is the big trees which give the climate-change

benefits, and not the smaller ornamentals. Secondly, it is also very obvious from even a cursory inspection that the smaller trees such as ornamental cherries and almonds so favoured by urban planners also cause serious damage to pavements and other structures.

The value of such trees must be recognised if we are to gain the future benefits. Furthermore, given the stresses faced by such trees, they require more care not less. With climate change scenarios the stresses will increase alongside the benefits provided by these trees. So it then becomes obvious that to maximise the impacts of summer temperatures and on flood risk for example, we now need a programme of positive street tree renewal, and with the species so despised by many urban planners today. Failure to do this will be a very expensive mistake.

The benefits of urban street trees

It is now becoming accepted fact that trees in urban areas have particular 'worth', and as a part of the urban forest, urban street trees are especially important. Some of the benefits associated with urban street trees include:

1. A green & high quality environment
2. Noise reduction
3. Visual enhancement
4. Moderation of extreme weather and '*climate-proofing*' of urban areas
5. Reduction in costs or expected costs of air-conditioning *etc*
6. Moderation of precipitation runoff and flood-risk through interception at canopy level and root-pits acting as '*soakaways*' to take surface runoff into groundwater
7. Removal of particulate pollution
8. Enhanced house values and '*desire to live*' in a locale
9. Enhanced urban ecology, biodiversity, habitat continuity and connectivity
10. History, heritage and connectivity with the past
11. Local distinctiveness and cultural identity
12. Urban seasonality
13. Community and individual health – physical, mental & spiritual
14. Associated with (13) major financial saving for the health and other services

However, there is a downside too. The trees which deliver the most significant benefits are obviously those which are the biggest and the most long-lived. Whilst nice rows of small Almonds or Cherries enhance visual amenity they do little else; it is the old forest trees, often despised by planners and managers which help in climate-proofing and flood attenuation. It is these

trees in an urban environment which require the most care and the greatest expenditure. They also carry the greatest attendant risk if failure occurs. In terms of gradual damage such as uplift of pavements *etc.*, all trees, if not effectively planned and managed, can have adverse impacts.

The politics of urban street trees

This then leads to the issues relating to the politics of urban trees in general and street trees in particular. The perceived costs and damages associated with big forest trees in the urban catchment are high. The perceived risks, whilst in reality very small, are also considered large. The inspection, care, maintenance, and where necessary remediation or removal cost associated with these big trees are high, and compared with rural grown trees their lives are shorter and more fraught.

Some of the public too may worry about damage to pavements, the inconvenience of autumn leaves, impacts of clay movement on building foundations (which removal may exacerbate), branch fall in high winds, guano from nesting or roosting birds (and even noise from the same), and collateral damage to nearby properties if failure occurs. These concerns may lead to external political pressure to '*do something*'. Combined with the feeling that these trees are somehow '*inappropriate*' along urban residential roads, and that the costs of the maintenance and the pressures of responsibility placed on local authorities are onerous, builds an unspoken consensus for removal.

Yet it is these same trees, largely planted by enlightened Victorians or the planners of the early twentieth century, or subsumed into the urbanised landscape from the countryside as twentieth century towns sprawled across their rural hinterlands, which give the maximum benefits. It is these trees which give character to suburbs such as Sheffield's desirable Fulwood or Nether Edge for example. It is certainly these trees which will help climate-proof our towns and cities in terms of future climate change scenarios and extreme weather events.

What are the threats?

Ever since we invented the modern town or city, the big trees have been under pressure. However, over time with pioneering work in North America and in Europe good practice in terms of care and maintenance, have been developed. But this requires money and skilled staff in order to deliver it effectively on the ground. Urban street trees have long been the Cinderella of local authority expenditure, and ongoing care and maintenance have frequently been replaced by pulses of intensive, often drastic, '*maintenance*' or '*safety*' works. So once again we face drastic cuts in public services and

especially in local authority provision. This will leave street trees especially vulnerable since they have no voice and cannot '*speak*', at least not to most of us. Particularly, with the politics of street trees as noted earlier this is a potentially very bad scenario.

In Sheffield for example, some of the city's leafiest and greenest areas could be under threat due to proposed public sector job cuts. This may spark a debate on the future of street trees in the city, or it may be done by sleight of hand. Whichever political party was returned after the 2010 election we were guaranteed major cuts. We can rest assured that these issues will not be high on the political agendas of the next few years.

Policies and visions

There are many current policy and strategy statements and initiatives which relate positively to street trees. However, there is one in particular that provides a very robust platform from which to take the dialogue forwards. This is the *Trees in Towns II* report which provides a very comprehensive and well-evidence grounding for the issues and future debates. The problem really, is that it is unlikely that many politicians or planners will take the time to read it. In which case how can we progress the debate and argue the case?

Conclusions: Champions for street trees and the decision-making process

Unlike a parkland or even some urban woods for example, street trees have few publicly accessible and site-specific management plans, and almost no '*friends*' or at least friends groups. When trees are felled and the stump grinders swiftly move in to remove all evidence, one questions the degree to which the community and local householders were consulted? To what extent too would they understand the implications for their house values and even for their health? I wonder.

This also raises issues of '*power and influence relationships*' and in effect lobby groups within and around local politics and local government.

Table 1 is a gross simplification of these complex issues but is useful in highlighting some broad truths. There is an emerging evidence base to support the value of street trees and to promote their benefits and the need to maintain, manage and enhance them as a vital component of the urban forest. However, the key to action is not merely through evidence but through champions at every level. The question then is who are they and where are they? As I have already suggested the local government tree officer is an obvious champion but we also need to grow and empower key people in the community from elected members of councils to local

TABLE 1: Power, influence and lobbying for trees

Local community	Elected politicians	Local government officers	Media	External organisations	Consequences
Unaware or unconcerned	Indifferent or slightly concerned	Variable depending on role and position Senior officers both lead members and follow guidance	Will follow issues and look for headlines – but not proactive	??????????	Gradual decline in street trees quality and quantity with limited concern about loss – of trees or of necessary services
Aware, concerned and active	Enhanced awareness and political 'champions'	Enhanced awareness and officer 'champions'	May lead campaigns and awareness if there is a 'champion'	??????????	Street trees may be iconic and symbols of 'green' credentials and a thriving environment and a focus for the community
AWARENESS of issues and power relationships	The need for GUIDANCE	The need for EVIDENCE	INFORMATION and a HOOK	Who, where, when and how?	The role of CHAMPIONS?

voluntary tree wardens. In the heart of some of our urban areas there is also the challenge to engage and empower minority and disadvantaged communities to also grow their awareness of trees and their importance. In a DIY society I suspect that this will be a challenge.

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