

What do we talk about when we talk about tree-planting?

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The Latin term *axis mundi* refers the Earth's axis of rotation, the line that runs through the Earth's diameter to connect the two poles. In the 20th century, it began to be applied broadly to the conceptual axes that exist throughout many mythologies and religions, axes that extend beyond the planet's terrestrial confines to connect with the celestial and the heavens. In many ancient depictions – such as Yggdrasil, the tree that connects all the nine worlds of Norse mythology, spanning the heavens, the Earth and the underworld – an *axis mundi* is symbolized by a tree.

Trees have always been dominant figures in the narratives of human history, from the Garden of Eden's apple tree of paradise lost to tropical island palm trees beckoning paradises still found. In the eye of the esoteric, trees are mothers, givers, rooted shelters and emblems of enlightenment. From a practical point of view, they're sources of food, water, paper, energy, building material, clean air and design.

But the vestiges of these narratives are being swallowed by a split identity born of desperation's grasps. In current discourse, trees are both the victims and possible cures of the dangerous damage we've inflicted on the planet. They're the innocent dead of fires, agriculture, illegal behaviors, yet they're also the heroes and the answers to these collective woes. We just need to plant millions, billions, trillions.



An illustration of Yggdrasil by Oluf Olufsen Bagge in an 1847-published edition of the Old Norse work of literature *Prose Edda*. Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, Wikimedia Commons

Trees can communicate, this is known. Through the vast underground networks of mycelia that connect their root systems, they warn one another when a disease or a pest has crept into their corner of the forest. They share minerals and nutrients, food and water, based on one another's needs. Mother trees give shelter to the young and the suffering.

Except for the Indigenous and scientific few, we have largely forgotten how to listen.

As we speak on trees' behalf – thrusting them into headlines, brands, campaigns, corporate social responsibility and restoration initiatives – what is it that we're saying? If new trees are to be our saviors, or any form of one, are we giving them the proper teachings and testimonies they need?

Tree-planting, the silver bullet

Near the end of each year, the Global Carbon Project releases an annual report on emissions. In 2019, it found that land and forests stored 29 percent of emissions (the atmosphere stored 44 percent and waters 23 percent). The vast majority of carbon released, 86 percent, came from fossil fuels and 14 percent from changes in land-use, often deforestation and agriculture.

Safe storage of carbon in the atmosphere and in oceans has limitations. Save for praying for a Silicon Valley miracle cure, the primary way we can help our waters and skies is emit less.

But land lends itself more to our control. "One of the first things people think about is, 'Okay, trees store carbon. We plant a tree; we store carbon,'" says Robert Nasi, director general of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR).

And so putting trees in the ground gets cast as a no-brainer equation, allowing us to subtract what emissions we refuse to quit adding. Plus, it's cheap.

"For the past year, it feels like there's been kind of a hype cycle around tree planting," says Rhett Butler, founder of celebrated environmental news site Mongabay. "Business leaders, social media influencers, politicians – even Donald Trump – have jumped on the bandwagon of tree planting. The media has often covered positive statements about tree planting as a silver bullet to addressing climate change."

"Tree planting 'has mind-blowing potential' to tackle climate crisis" was a headline run by The Guardian in July 2019 following a controversial report published in the journal Science.

The major publicity moment for tree planting came in February 2020, with the launch of 1T.org. It certainly wasn't the first tree-planting initiative of its kind; there has been the longstanding Bonn Challenge, the New York Declaration on Forests and Africa's Great Green Wall to name but a few. But 1T.org had all the right ingredients to turn trees into celebrities, put forth by the World Economic Forum in a partnership led by Salesforce's CEO Marc Benioff and the food and environment agencies of the UN.



Women planting trees in Africa's Great Green Wall initiative. Courtesy of UNCCD

It was a beautiful union of business and science behemoths with the glittering goal of planting and conserving 1 trillion trees within a decade, potentially reducing atmospheric carbon by 25 percent – a silver bullet if there ever was one.

It also had an emotional impact. “I think people are looking for solutions, for something that they understand,” says Nicole Schwab, co-director of the platform to accelerate nature-based solutions and 1T.org at the World Economic Forum. “Climate change and carbon dioxide can be very abstract – but a tree? Everyone can relate.”

Tree-planting, the tool

That last sentence was purposefully misleading, to prove a point. Read down in that Times article, and it quotes celebrated ecologist Thomas Crowther noting that trees are not a replacement for curbing emissions. Or, in the aforementioned Guardian piece, quotes from Crowther – who led the controversial study – hammer on the importance of where trees are planted. “A lot of people, they don’t really read anything,” says Butler. “They just look at headlines or they look at the photo. So there’s this very surface-level understanding – consumption without any sort of context.”

“There’s that saying, ‘A bad workman blames his tools,’” says Nasi. “And that’s why I push for balanced views [of tree-planting] especially in the media. It’s how you use the tool that will make it something that is useful and positive or something that is hurtful and negative.”

For examples, planting trees in grasslands can destroy those ecosystems, he says, which are already carbon-rich without trees; planting the wrong trees in areas with too-high temperatures can impact the local water supply, which can lead to displacement of people. “Climate change: Planting new forests ‘can do more harm than good’” read a June headline from BBC.



A palm tree plantation up against natural forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Axel Fassio, CIFOR

On the flip side, when the right trees are planted in the right places and given proper care-taking, tree-planting does live up to the hype. It can and will store carbon and provide wood, fiber, water, food and jobs. The BBC article was written after the release of two studies, one on the pitfalls of subsidies for tree-planting – when those subsidies are poorly designed – and the other on the

overestimations of new forests' carbon storage – when those forests' trees aren't tailored specifically to the local environment.

"It's an interesting thing, because everybody's right," says Nasi. Even with oil and gas companies that want to use tree-planting to offset their continuation of business-as-usual – one of the darkest sides of the equation: "They will continue extracting whether I talk to them or not. If by talking to them, I can manage to convince them to restore millions of hectares of land, there can still be a benefit somewhere. The point is that tree planting is not as simple as it looks."

About six years ago, Mongabay began publishing bullet points just below articles' headlines to try and force feed even a few key facts during readers' eight-second attention spans. Going deeper, Butler is now leading a reporting initiative on tree-planting projects, to help educate potential investors, policymakers and individuals on which projects to support. "I realized there's a gap in this space in terms of good reporting on these issues and an understanding of the complexities around tree planting." The platform will be launched next year on Mongabay.

"I find it unhelpful when people are using headlines to create more buzz and create an issue when there isn't one," says Schwab. "Everyone in this field agrees that it's about the right tree in the right place, and it's about tree growing."

Tree-planting, the brand

In late September last year, people were potting tree seedlings in the middle of New York City's Times Square. It was an act of partnership between Facebook and global tree-planting non-profit One Tree Planted. More than 1,500 trees were potted, which would later be taken and planted in upstate New York.

"The average person out there wants to help the environment, but they just don't know where to start or how to go about it," says Matt Hill, One Tree Planted's founder and CEO founder, who comes from a background in marketing. "People want to help, or they want to understand the importance of trees, which comes down to our six pillars: air, water, biodiversity, health, social impact and climate. We keep it very simple – and with pretty pictures."

There are a number of similar tree-planting organizations that are well on their way to becoming household names: Eden Reforestation Projects, Arbor Day Foundation, Trees for the Future, Plant-for-the-Planet. Each has a nifty logo, a simple mission, and an even simpler entry point for individuals and business to get involved in tree-planting – from gamified apps to monthly donation systems that operate like any regular subscription service.



A tree planted in Kalimantan, Indonesia, whose peatland forests have been widely cleared for agriculture and commodity plantations. Mokhamad Edliadi, CIFOR

While Hill puts himself at the ready to help any curious individual or business get deep into the ecological trenches about the nuances of tree-planting, he's also a realist about the fact that most people interacting with their brands will never care to do so. One Tree Planted works closely with the World Resources Institute, and the organizations it works with on-the-ground in tree-planting sites need to have tree survival rate track records of 80 percent or higher.

"For reforestation organizations, my goal is that we're the one that most often comes to of mind," says Hill. "That's my number one goal. And if you develop the brand, then donations and everything else just follows with it." By the end of 2020, One Tree Planted will have planted some 20 million trees, funded by donations and partnerships of every scales: single-dollar donations, small-scale businesses like sustainable sneaker company Saye and record-label Steppas Records, and multinationals such as Nestlé, Adidas, DHL, Ford and a host of others.

It's a ping-pong approach to leveling up brand recognition. Brands that include sustainability in their marketing are increasingly purchased over those that don't – particularly by younger spenders – which in turn gives their organizational partners more visibility and clout, which then appeals to consumers more, and so on, back and forth.

"It is very much a rising tide, raising all boats sort of scenario here," says Derrick Emsley, CEO of outdoor apparel brand Tentree, which partners with organizations such as Eden Reforestation Projects to plant 10 trees for every garment sold. "The narrative of tree planting is going up. But it's also a narrative that can start to deteriorate if things start to come out that the work isn't actually being done, or the same tree is being 'sold' multiples times. You can't abandon trees after they're planted, or the people they've provided jobs for."

And, in case there was any question about Derrick's consensus with the scientific community: "It's not a silver bullet, it's a tool. But it's a tool that has to be managed effectively, it's a tool that has to be sustainable."

Tree-planting, the quiet future

When a tree is chopped down, it doesn't stop speaking. The stump continues to send signals to the ecosystem around it.

Trends come and go, and soon enough, the media is likely to fixate on a new hot-topic solution for climate change. Nasi, during his 40-year career as a forester, has seen tree planting fall in and out of fashion numerous times in many different forms, from NGOs backlashing against plantation planting to national governments instrumentalizing tree planting to gain international support. The proper planting of trees doesn't lessen in importance during the lulls in public discourse, but it does require more interwoven, habitual attention.

"We're at a high point for interest in tree planting, and I wouldn't expect it to be at the same level a year from now," says Butler. "I think it has to be integrated into broader post-COVID systems change approaches to have a lasting staying power and public interest. If you have governments and NGOs putting significant resources behind tree planting, then it's less important whether Elon Musk is tweeting about it."

For Schwab, sustaining attention for tree planting also requires a return to the axis mundi in its more spiritual sense. "I do feel that we've lost our connection to nature. It's often put in a very intellectual, or a very dry economic discourse. What is needed is for us to reconnect with nature and to re-understand ourselves as part of it. This is a rupture that needs to be healed at a deep, deep level."



Bolaina trees, whose timber is sold on international markets, are mixed with food crops in a sustainable agroforestry landscape in Peru. Juan Carlos Huayllapuma, CIFOR

Source: <https://news.globallandscapesforum.org/48366/what-do-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-tree-planting/>