

Every Tree Tells a Story

POLICY INNOVATION INSIGHT 1



How do people value trees?

A multiple stakeholder story-telling exploration of tree-sources.

Dr James Bonner, Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship

Professor Sarah Dodd, Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship

Dr Juliette Wilson, Department of Marketing

This Policy Innovation Insight presents findings and analysis from the “Every Tree Tells a Story” project, a Glasgow-wide partnership, funded by Glasgow City Council and Strathclyde Business School

1st edition: June 2022, 2nd edition, March 2026

Contents

Acknowledgements	page 1
Project Partners	page 1
Executive Summary	page 2
Policy Points	page 3
Making Home and Habitat	page 5
Trees as Family and Friends	page 7
Learning and knowledge	page 9
Joy, Love and Beauty	page 11

Project Partners

Project partners include Strathclyde Business School, and the Department of Education, University of Strathclyde; the GALLANT Project, University of Glasgow, NovelEco, at Trinity College Dublin, Glasgow School of Art, actor and musician Tam Dean Burn and a range of planning, development and education departments at Glasgow City Council.

Fellow story-gatherers, curators, planners, engagers and analysts from these project partners include: Ingeborg Birnie, James Bonner; Duncan Booker, Tam Dean Burn, Clair Cooper Etive Currie, Mike Danson, Gillian Dick, Sarah Dodd, Ria Dunkley, Mark Johnson, Emma Morton, Andrea Reid, Jaime Toney, and Juliette Wilson

Acknowledgements

The authors of this Policy Innovation Insight would like to acknowledge all of the input and inspiration that our project partners have contributed in supporting us during this phase of Every Tree Tells a Story. We would also like to thank all of the participants who shared their stories with us via our collection of postcards, and in discussions with us. In particular we would like to acknowledge several Glasgow primary schools, Drumchapel Cycle Hub, The Hidden Gardens, GUEST (Glasgow University Environmental Sustainability Team), and Strathclyde University Student Union, for their role in hosting us to undertake postcard engagement at events they have organised on at their locations.

Visit our website www.everytree.uk

Feel free to get in touch by email everytree@strath.ac.uk

You can also follow us on Instagram [@everytreetellsastory](https://www.instagram.com/everytreetellsastory)



Executive Summary

The Every Tree Tells a Story (ETTAS) collaboration started in the spring of 2021 and continues to grow and develop. Project partners include a diverse group of academics, local authority professionals, and creative practitioners.

For a year, from the autumn of 2022 until the end of summer 2023, the Strathclyde Business School partners conceptualised and carried out an innovative civic engagement with a wide variety of Glasgow citizen stakeholders. We used simple postcards to interact with Glaswegians of very diverse ages, origins, roles, and locations, inviting them to share their stories about trees; if, why, and how trees matter to them.

Some engagements were in quite structured workshops, as with educational, cultural, and sporting institutions. Other interactions were less formal and more emergent in style, in a variety of places in and around the city of Glasgow: including along the Kelvin Way, in George Square, on university campuses, in the pub, and at yoga classes. Throughout, our main approach used specially designed – and eco-printed - postcards to simply ask “**Every tree tells a story: what’s yours?**”.

Now with more than 200 postcards collected, we tell the wider story here of what it is about trees that is so valued and valuable to people, across the city of Glasgow, using the words and images from our city-wide engagement. It might be anticipated that the majority of our findings would focus on the familiar attributes of trees and the treescape. Obvious examples include clean air, shade, biodiversity and visual appeal. These benefits were indeed both highlighted and valued. More surprising were the richer, deeper and more complex appreciation of the value of trees, shared very widely in most of our tree stories.

Four key themes emerged from our findings:

Making Home and Habitat: Trees are valued for their life-giving provision of oxygen, habitat for other species, and as a focal anchor point for human households and families. They provide a model of other ways of being, beyond the economic, drawing on older understandings of the home as embedded in natural place.

Trees as Family and Friends: Special trees and woodlands act as focal points for families and friends to deepen and strengthen relationships, across generations and locations.

Learning and Knowledge: The treescape provides a relational space, structure, shelter and spirit for free play, exploration, natural home-coming, and learning to live well with place, planet, and people.

Joy and Beauty: The treescape is revered as a place of special beauty and resonance, offering profound spiritual, emotional and aesthetic bounty.

Policy Points

1. We found a strong and multi-dimensional appreciation of the socio-environmental benefits of the treescape. This was true across all age groups, from school children to grandparents, and for people from very diverse contexts.
2. There is a clear, complex understanding of the policy benefits of trees, and a strong implicit support for tree-based policies and civic practices.
3. Treescapes provide the socio-emotional apparatus and context for the development of robust and long-lived relationships, through both kinship and friendship bonds, both across generations and within local peer groups.
4. Trees provide a unique shelter, stimulus, structure, and seasonality to support the strengthening of social capital, within families and localities.
5. Specific trees hold great resonance for citizens, and act to link people to place across generations.
6. Ritualised family journeys to such trees were especially important to dual-context people, linking them to homelands, family and identity.
7. The loss of trees, especially when this is caused or accompanied by tree removal, is much lamented and causes significant grief. Citizen resistance to even essential tree-felling can be anticipated, and careful communication is recommended around tree management. This is likely to be especially resonant for the ash dieback challenge.
8. Access to trees and treescapes in childhood provides a wide range of specific opportunities for active and reflective play, embedding in nature and learning to be a part of it. There is a special freedom and sense of shelter associated with tree-play, much missing in today's cities.
9. Gardens with trees, and trees in gardens, are especially valued as safe sites for unsupervised free play, with park trees, and those in schools, also important for childhood.

10. Trees played only a small role in local food production, typically fruit sweets made from the produce of garden trees. Associated with grandmothers, more than mothers or oneself, harvesting and cooking from trees is seen in quite a nostalgic light. Returning to trees as a nutrition source, although consonant with wider localised food and community growing policies, will require considerable re-discovery of traditional skills.
11. Although a longer term and more complex option, re-engaging communities with domestic food production through fruit trees, and mini-food forests, offers a multi-generational tool for connection, sharing tree skills, and re-thinking nutrition.
12. Trees enact and encourage a more nature-based tempo to life, and living, with a greater awareness of seasons cycling, and of longer-term organic growth through decades and centuries. They offer a focus, a vehicle, and a lens for creating and communicating longer term place policies and encouraging citizen support for nature-based solutions to grand challenges.
13. There is a deep respect for trees, an almost spiritual reverence, and a strong emotional connection with and through the treescape. Again, this tie underlines the potential for woodlands to act as focal points for nature-based engagement with citizens, building on this very firm foundation of arboreal symbolic capital.
14. Our analysis reveals a tree-centred mindset which offers an alternative to more economic models of individuals, community and environment. Instead, we found strong evidence of older conceptualisations of the home and the household as embedded within local natural contexts, with implications of mutual and reciprocal stewardship between people and “their” trees.



Postcards from primary school children.

Findings 1: Making Home and Habitat

Clear benefits were expressed in many stories around a portfolio of common goods, generated for all by the treescape: clean air, oxygen, habitats for biodiversity, and the mental and physical wellbeing of citizens. Trees' branches connect above our heads, and their roots form complex multi-species networks below our feet. They provide a canopy full of life, and connective systems which tie spaces and places together. The treescape, for example, provides a habitat for other species, a shared home with ourselves, and this too can bring much joy and solace, as well as being valued in its own right.

"trees are homes for birds and other animals" (c125); "I have a huge tree just outside my window at home which is home to a couple of magpies who I sit and watch on a horrible grey day coming and going, hopping on branches, can sit for hours, makes me feel calm and happy" (c126).

These overarching values of trees and treescapes are underpinned by their role in providing home and habitat for a wide array of fauna and flora, including humanity.

"Trees are not single unified entities but collections of diverse and multifarious fibres and impulses they are ancient and stately protectors of life, giving shelter to birds, food for animals, and the air we breathe. They are an integral part of a nature that informs our mythology and fiction, our music and our culture." (c13)

Trees perform very significant and strong roles in building meaningful and positive relationships between people and place; an essential component in engaging citizens more deeply in responding to the climate crisis. This link of our both the physical - and also deeply emotional – connection of trees to ideas of 'home' is beautifully depicted by some of our school aged respondents. One child states simply *"I like my home tree because it reminds me of home."* (c168)

Being up in the tree, or in a den under it, is often depicted as a return to a special place of shelter. Being in a forest, surrounded by trees is also re-told as a form of coming home:

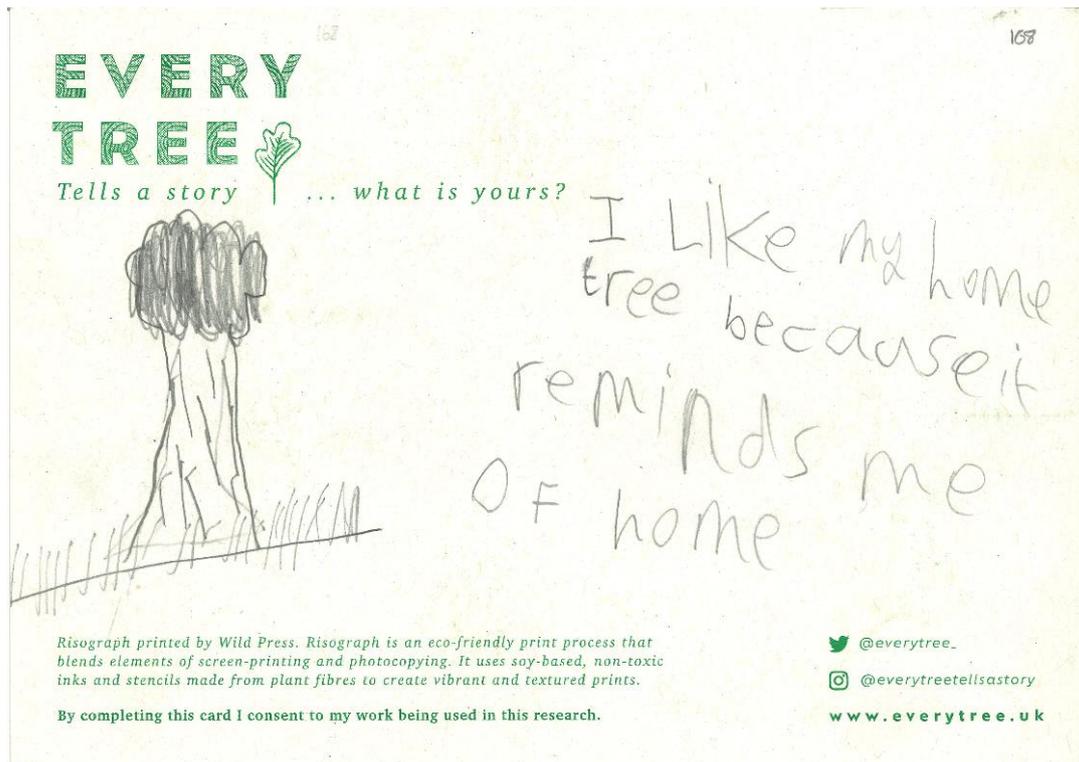
"There used to be a giant tree in my garden when I was growing up. Each year I would climb the tree, make dens under the tree, play in the leaves under the tree in autumn and shelter from the rain in April showers. This tree makes me think of home!" (H26)

There are also crumbles, fresh fruit and jams in our stories, although these are never portrayed as functionally important food sources. They, do, though remind us of the potential of trees in this regard also – so crucial given the UK's high levels of food poverty. Re-engaging with domestic food production is an additional potential policy route for engagement with the treescape.

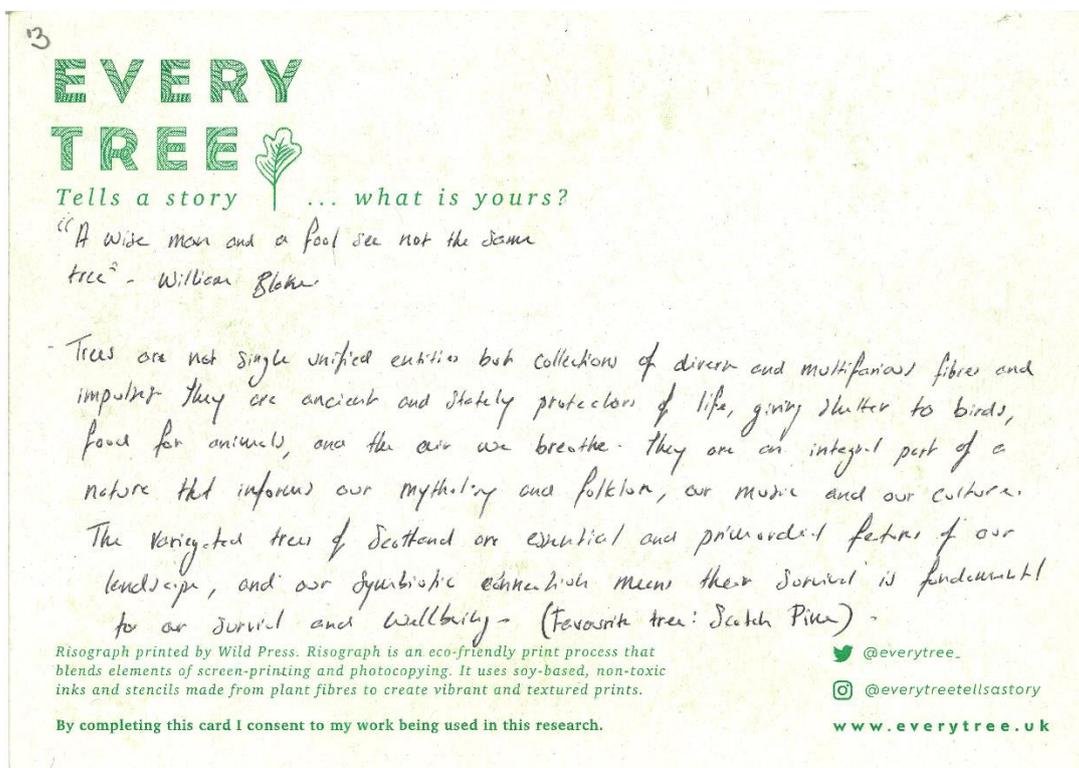
"I bought a yellow plum tree half price because the seller didn't know how big it would grow... I planted this tree on top of our recently deceased Guinea pig 'squeak'. This tree is 20 feet tall and still growing. It produces the best plums I have ever tasted." (c150)

Illustrating the power that trees have for rooting us with homes of origin, and richly diverse cultures of traditional domestic food production, another respondent tells us:

"The tree that brings out the most memories to me is an apple tree in my grandfather's garden in Kazakhstan . Every summer I would go to my hometown to visit my grandparents and the first thing I would see on the table would be the apples from this tree. We would harvest apples from mid July til mid September and wrap them in pieces of newspaper to store them and eat them throughout the year." (c31)



Postcard (c168)



Postcard (c13)

Findings 2: Trees as Family and Friends

Trees are highly valued as focal points in deeply significant relationships with family and friends, embodying the memories of important social interactions. Trees are also clearly understood as entities in their own right. People reported very significant and strongly felt emotional and relational ties with trees, which help build and sustain ties with place:

“Soon after I moved to Glasgow (about 13 years ago), I developed a deep attachment to 3 trees. All of them live in The Botanic Gardens in The West End. When I lived in the area I would visit them weekly. I liked to touch and talk to the beautiful Platemus by the river Kelvin. Its presence to me was (and is) the closest thing to something spiritual I can think of” (c26).

Another writes of the comfort and companionship which relationships with trees can bring to those struggling with stress, loneliness, and despair – all major and growing challenges to citizen wellbeing:

“Trees - they have always brought me a sense of peace, companions through lonely times and many forest walks. Seeking comfort, a hand on the rough back of an ancient tree, like a constant, steady presence, full of mysteries and the knowledge of countless years.” (c79)

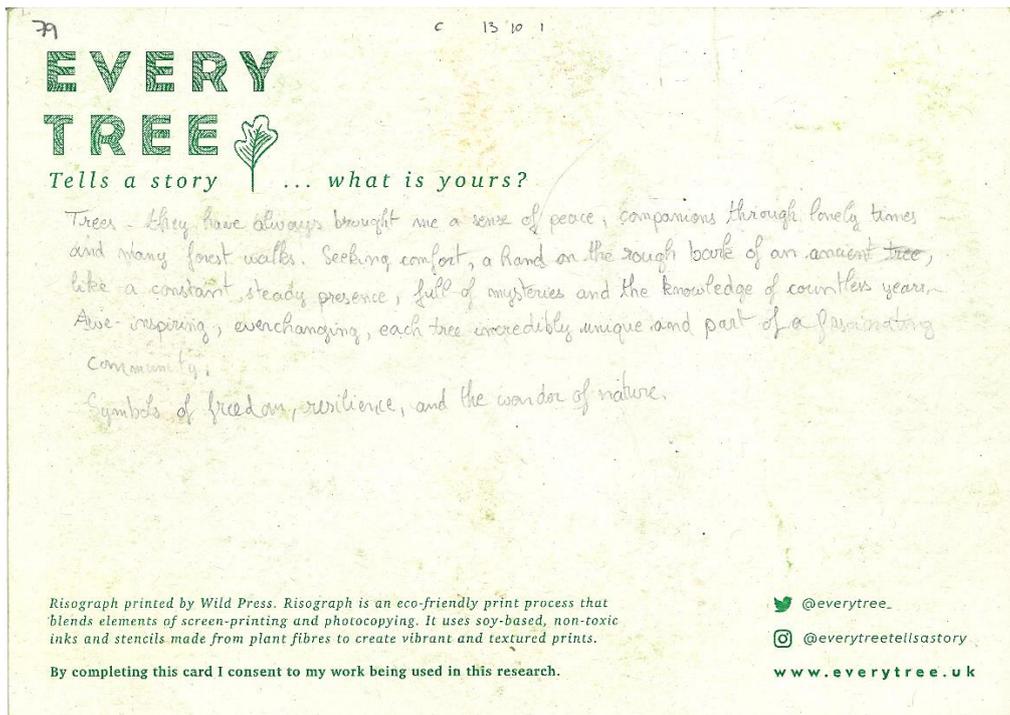
Trees ‘live’ in place, like us and our respondents, sharing the city as neighbours co-habiting in a community. Trees are the nursemaids of our early adventures in climbing, exploring, hiding and seeking, and making dens. In these childhood – and sometimes adult – interactions, tree-relationships are shared with our most intimate strong ties: siblings, cousins, and local friends. Treescapes provide a vital context for the development of imaginative play, of early social interactions, and of the deep kinships bonds that can sustain us throughout life.

“When I was a young girl my friends and I would play in our street. There was a blossom tree and when the leaves would all fall to the ground my friends and I would play at weddings, picking up the pink leaves and throwing them up in the air pretending it was confetti! Happy memories and so much fun.” (c117)

A number of stories, from diverse times and places, were about shared family journeys to a special tree. Very many stories saw trees as destination entities, visited by multiple generations of families together, in almost ritualised journeys (often on foot). A lot of these were linked to returns to a home context of parents or grandparents, to re-visiting locations which embody through time a family’s cross-generational ties of place, identity, and community.

For those now distant from their childhood or familial “home”, this sense of remembered (and sometimes still visited) trees as the focal point for belonging and identity is particularly poignant. Shared family hikes to specific trees - special friends – quite literally walk the meanings of place into being, re-inscribing long-held bonds between people and place. Indeed, where trees didn’t exist, families may even dream them into being: *“We (my 2 yr old and I) like to imagine tree houses. We don’t have a garden of our own so we imagine this tree house.” (c56)* The trees themselves were so focal to this experience that it is perhaps not too fanciful to see them as also being almost extended family members. This very strong relational tie to trees is also evidenced in the sustained emotions generated in our story-tellers, including loss at a tree’s demise:

“A well visited site by multiple generations of my family is (was) a baobab tree which had grown over, and come to dominate, a man made wall. A 300 year old tree growing over a long forgotten 12th century stone wall. I, like my grandparents, visited it on many occasions. On my last visit – it was gone. Died and chopped down. Haven’t been back to Gede since.” (c5)



Postcard (c79)



Cherry Blossom and sunlight, Glasgow Green

Credit: James Bonner

Findings 3: Learning and Knowledge

Walking and playing with trees provide an experiential learning context for the making of deep meaning, re-learning natural temporality, bonding a family to a place and each other, and offering natural spaces to “come home” to, for peace, reflection, and solace. The awareness and appreciation of seasonality and natural temporality, as mediated through and with trees, is very significant within the postcard portfolio. Trees provided our participants with a sense of the seasons changing, and enjoyment of this return to a more humane and embedded way of living.

“Every year during Autumn the trees shed their orange leaves in return for new green leaves. They change every year, the same way we do. They leave their orange leaves behind them, in the past. This resembles me starting uni and leaving my school years behind me. The trees above me are the trees I will see for the next four years, while at uni.” (c20).

Relating, doing identity work, and making place with and through trees is often a very active set of practices. Many of our tree stories emphasised the role of trees in play, in learning to climb, play chase, hide, make dens, and explore. Climbing in particular was very evident in many of the postcards and was clearly a joy in itself:

“I lived in a scheme in Pollok as a child, and loved it. Across the road was a long avenue of trees and out back the flat backed onto a vacant lot (we called it The Field). I remember climbing, playing and naming a special tree. I remember swinging on a rope from another, larger tree. I remember watching the season change with joy. My childhood was filled with green!” (c53)

Trees act as focal points for memories and meanings of place, family, and childhood, in very profound ways. These almost nostalgic, and sometimes quite melancholy, stories of shared emplaced experiences could be found in the postcard stories of all ages, including the very young. Embedding kinship bonds within specific places can thus be mediated through treescapes, and the slowly changing longevity of trees enhances long term perspectives of place through and across generations: *“Sitting under these trees in Rottenrow reminds me of when my grannie was alive and we sat outside in the evening during the summer. It’s a lovely feeling.” (c8)*

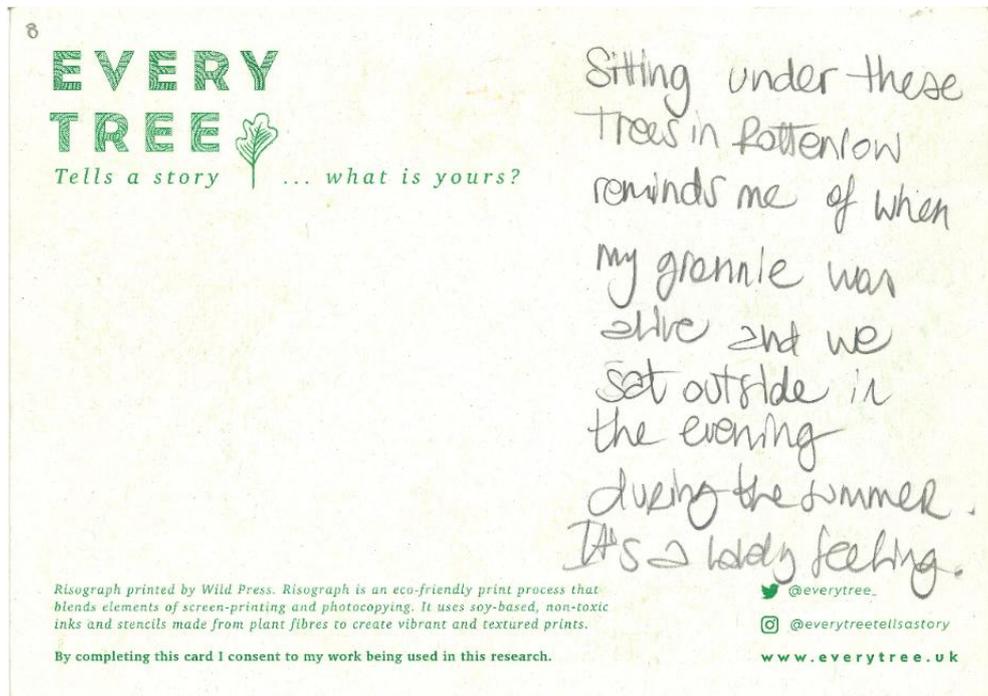
Trees were also chosen to give meaning to the very significant moments in lives, from memory trees, to first kisses, and even marriages. Families and friendships co-evolve within treescapes, developing and deepening together, anchoring kinship, romance and companionship in specific tree-related practices and rituals. The romance of trees, the imaginative space they provide for dreaming futures and cherishing past memories, of significant value by Glasgow’s story-tellers:

“For years I went on a hill that had one tree on top. I imagined myself and my love there. Finally I met with her and went there together, I proposed her in the silence of nature under that tree. The dream came through...” (c18).

The planting, tending and stewarding of trees was another form of active engagement. There is again a strong sense of ritual in the seasonal practices of gathering fruit, typically with older, female family members, and transforming this bounty into food for sharing with family and friends. The range of foodstuff created from garden fruit trees was quite tightly circumscribed; jams, crumbles and pies, but the wider resonance of these practices was unmistakable.



Walking the Strathclyde University tree trail close to Rottenrow, Glasgow, with participants of the [Transforming Enterprise Education](#) project (TrEE). Credit: Simon Forsyth, Lateral North



Postcard (c8)

Findings 4: Joy, Love and Beauty

The beauty of trees certainly emerged as of major significance to our story-tellers, as in this charming prose-poem from a primary school pupil:

"Palm tree are nice like my bed. Oak trees are as beautiful as flowers. I like to see the branches of a tree grow out to connect with others. The coco nut smiles at you from the palm tree." (c103).

Trees are held in awe for their majesty, wonder, loveliness. Sound and scent-scapes were also an uplifting source of joy and pleasure. Most valued within our collection of stories and images were these positive emotions and connections engendered by the trees themselves. Many tree stories spoke of their love of trees, of their might and majesty, and, again, that peaceful sense of homecoming. Grief at the loss of individual trees, and the destruction of treescapes is a powerful shared emotion, too, and very deeply felt.

"I feel alive around trees. Where we would be without them? I feel like being in forest; I'm home. I can breathe and the sound of the wind in the trees seems calming and soothing. I feel the rush of history. But I also feel in my bones the deep sadness when trees are being cut down and removed from their habitat where they inevitably contribute to others' habitat" (c72).

This aesthetic value of trees is embedded in the place-making value they bring in practical terms, not least in how they change and enhance the places we live, work, and play. Here, a specialist-in-training connects their personal love for trees with their studies into planning and place development, articulating a key central message of this study:

"I love trees. I think they are so powerful and creating places in cities where people want to hang out, they change the atmosphere of a space and bring character. Studying civil engineering with architecture I am fascinated by how trees and green spaces can have an impact and change the feel of a space." (c12)

Trees are loved deeply, respected and treasured for their gifts, and act as a focal representation for the richness of the natural world, more widely: *"I love trees. I definitely feel a happy feeling when walking near or besides one. It also reassures me thinking about "mother" trees and their role in the forest" (c149).* Joy, love, serenity, peace, solace, spirituality, comfort, happiness, connectivity, engagement: all these positive emotional experiences are associated with trees, and with being in and amongst the treescape. There is sorrow too, and memory, and grief, finding solace within the treescape:

"Every tree tells a story each very personal, a moment in time. So, choosing one in particular is impossible. They bring joy, sorrow, laughter, anger, love, a continuous gift." (c158).

There is almost a reverence when our story-tellers speak of the spiritual and psychological gifts of the treescape. A deep and calm sense of joyful connectedness with nature and its beauties commands profound respect amongst story-tellers. The value of trees is literally priceless:

In a hectic, fast-paced, stressed world these trees help ground and centre thoughts and bring a moment of peace and tranquillity - the smell of nature and not cars, the sounds of birds and rustling leaves and not engines or machines, the dappled light broken by the leaves and not fluorescent bulbs. The trees are a reminder of natural beauty and order in a world that often feels unstable, with an uncertain future. (c1

72

EVERY TREE

Tells a story ... what is yours?

I feel alive around trees. Where would we be without them?
I feel like being in forest; I'm home.
I can breathe and the sound of the wind in the trees seems calming and soothing.

I feel the rush of history.

But I also feel in my bones the deep sadness when trees are being cut down and removed from their habitat where they inevitably contribute to others' habitat.

Risograph printed by Wild Press. Risograph is an eco-friendly print process that blends elements of screen-printing and photocopying. It uses soy-based, non-toxic inks and stencils made from plant fibres to create vibrant and textured prints.

By completing this card I consent to my work being used in this research.

 @everytree_

 @everyreetellstory

www.everytree.uk

Postcard (c72)

158

EVERY TREE

Tells a story ... what is yours?

EVERY TREE TELLS A STORY
EACH VERY PERSONAL, A
MOMENT IN TIME.
SO, CHOOSING ONE IN PARTICULAR
IS IMPOSSIBLE. THEY BRING JOY,
SORROW, LAUGHTER, ANDER'S LOVE,
A CONTINUOUS GIFT.

Risograph printed by Wild Press. Risograph is an eco-friendly print process that blends elements of screen-printing and photocopying. It uses soy-based, non-toxic inks and stencils made from plant fibres to create vibrant and textured prints.

By completing this card I consent to my work being used in this research.

 @everytree_

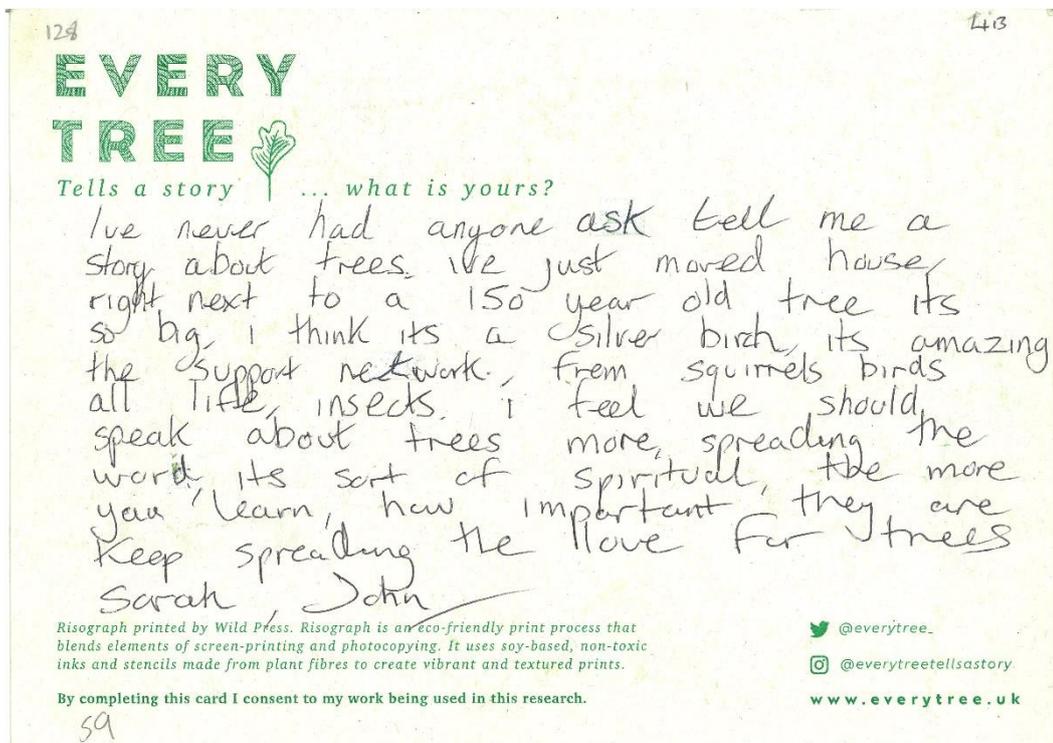
 @everyreetellstory

www.everytree.uk

Postcard (c158)



Extracting images and words from various postcards and presenting together in one assemblage. An imagined forest of tree stories.



Postcard C128