

## The life of trees

by Linda Baxter

When I was a child I read a science fiction story that made me think about trees in a new way. In the story, visitors from an advanced civilisation come to our planet and their spaceship lands in the middle of a forest. The aliens have a long conversation with the trees of the forest, and then leave again, happy to think that the inhabitants of earth are noble, intelligent and peaceful. Trees have always fascinated people. They are the biggest living things on our planet, and one of the most beautiful. Trees appear in many religions and have inspired artists for thousands of years.

### The oldest trees

Trees are also the oldest living organisms on earth. They are a direct link with thousands of years of history. The great age of trees makes them useful for all sorts of scientific research. The rings inside a tree are particularly useful to tell scientists about changes in the climate that happened many thousands of years ago before written records were kept.

The oldest living organism on earth is a bristlecone pine tree which grows in the USA. It is about 4,700 years old - which means that it was growing when the Egyptians built the Pyramids.

Sri Maha Bodhi is a banyan tree growing in Sri Lanka. It is the oldest tree in the world that has a recorded history - of more than 23 centuries. It is worshipped by more than 2,000 people daily because it is believed to be a sapling from the original tree that Buddha sheltered under in India over 2,500 years ago. Thousands of people worship this sacred tree every day.

The ginkgo tree is one of the oldest species of tree still living today. We know that it was living 160 million years ago when dinosaurs ruled the earth. Watch out for it if you see the film 'Jurassic Park'! But ginkgo fossils disappeared about 7 million years ago. Scientists thought that it was extinct until it was discovered in Japan in 1691. Buddhist monks had continued to cultivate the tree. Today it is popular in parks and gardens and is widely used in natural medicine.

### The community of trees

Trees may have a lot to teach us about being part of a community and how co-operation is better for a society than competition. Scientists are only just beginning to understand how it all works, but we now know that a community of trees growing together share all of the available resources with other. So, strong trees in a good position will share food and water with weaker trees that receive less sunlight. They do this through their roots, through the soil, and also through the networks of tiny fungi that grow in the soil between them.

And they don't only share with trees of the same species - any type of tree can benefit. A community of trees makes itself stronger by working together. The roots of giant redwood trees, for example, grow together under the ground. It's as if they are holding hands. This means that they are much stronger when there are heavy winds or floods.

Trees that are grown in city conditions do not live as long as trees that grow in a natural environment, maybe because they are more isolated. And people who work with trees know that a community with a good mixture of different species is stronger and more resistant to insects and diseases.

### The energy of trees

It has been proved that patients in hospital get better faster, feel less pain and go home quicker if there are trees outside the windows of their rooms. Spiritual and religious teachers for many years have been telling their students to learn from trees, to notice their stillness and strength and try to imitate it. It is true that trees absorb enormous amounts of energy from the sun - more than any other living thing. And some people believe that you can feel this energy if you choose a tree that you feel attracted to, put your arms around it and stay there holding it for a while.

This 'tree-hugging' is believed to be good for stress, make you sleep better, and help you to feel more positive and calm. And more and more people are doing it. The Irish politician Gerry Adams recently told a journalist that he regularly hugged trees. He said that it gave him a sense of calm and strength.

We all know that trees are essential for the environment and the survival of our planet. Perhaps they have even more to offer us in the future.

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