

# So just what is the Urban Forest,

## and why is it important?

*In this, the first part of a two part article, Kenton Rogers takes a look at what actually makes up the “Urban Forest” . Above is a picture of Torbay, the site of the UK’s first full iTree survey undertaken by Kenton and his company, Treconomics.*

Coming from a forestry background, Urban Forestry is a term I use a lot and one which many of us will be familiar with. But what do we actually mean when we talk about the urban forest?

Understanding the definitions involved is important because people have different interpretations of what constitutes the urban forest. Do we mean the street trees? Or a specific woodland in an urban area? Do we include shrubs, lawns or parks?

There also appears to be some difficulty in defining what is ‘urban’. As yet, there is no international agreement on the defining characteristics of the urban habitat (cited in the recent UK National Ecosystem Assessment). The Office of National Statistics in the UK simply classifies ‘urban’ as contiguous areas of

settlement with a population of 10,000 people.

We also need to be mindful that for many people even the very term ‘Urban Forest’ seems oxymoronic, the use of two apparently contradictory terms put together. They ask, “How can an area be simultaneously urban, and forest?”. Well, in my view it can, and this is why...

Broadly speaking, there are two main interpretations of what constitutes an ‘urban forest’. The first looks at the sum of all urban trees; including those situated in parks or in streets, on both private and public land, and considers orchards, hedges and other green spaces across the urban area under consideration to collectively make up an ‘urban forest’ (See Grey and Denke’s Urban Forestry for example). In

Konijnendijk's 'Defining Urban Forestry' paper this is called the 'broad' definition.

The second refers to urban forest as individual units within an urban area and in Evans's Forest Handbook is described thus, 'Urban forests can be defined by their placement in or near urban areas'.

This second definition refers to distinct areas of woodland within an urban area as urban forest, the 'narrow' definition. Although not technically incorrect, in my view this is a less helpful concept as it separates out the 'urban' from the 'forest' and oversimplifies the spatial relationship between the two, implying that they can indeed be separated.

I much prefer the definition given by Sands (in Forestry in a Global Context 2005), who takes 'the trees found in streets, municipal parks, gardens and reserves, golf courses, cemeteries, around streams, on private property, on catchments, in greenbelts and indeed almost everywhere' to make up the urban forest. He goes on to state 'The urban forest is the ecosystem containing all of the trees, plants and associated animals in the urban environment, both in and around the city'.

This definition is much more holistic and looks at the urban forest in the same way that a traditional forest might be considered. It also introduces it as an ecosystem too. Again, ecosystems are an important part of the urban fabric, yet they are often (incorrectly) viewed by the general populace to be something separate from 'urban'. Something perhaps one might pop into the car and drive off to and visit out of town.

Deneke (in Grey and Deneke's Urban Forestry) goes so far as to say that 'cities are forests' and by United Nations definition - Land with tree crown cover of more than 10 percent and area of more than 0.5 hectares - most cities and urban areas could indeed be classed as forests.

It has been argued that perhaps we should stop thinking about the trees in our towns and actually consider towns in our forests instead. This is by no means a new ideal, and visitors to 17th century Amsterdam often remarked that they could not tell if they were in a city or a forest.

John Evelyn visited in 1641 and was very impressed by the quarter known as Keisers-Graft *'which appears to be a City in a Wood, through the goodly ranges of stately and umbrageous Lime trees, exactly planted before each mans doore'*.

Considering the broad definition of urban forest and starting to think about the towns in our forests, brings trees and other components of the natural environment to the fore. This is important because its the urban forest which makes our towns and cities livable places. Its is especially the case when we consider future changes in our climate, which will be felt first and foremost in or urban areas.

The benefits provided by the urban forest are many and are well documented. Trees filter pollutants, reduce the urban heat island effect, provide aesthetic interest, improve health and can even reduce crime or encourage greater consumer spending. These benefits are also provided simultaneously and at relatively low cost. The benefits are even more pronounced in urban areas, because the urban environment is where most people live.

The number of people living in Urban areas of the UK for instance is currently estimated at around 80%, or 44 million people (ONS 2005). Globally, over 50% of the worlds population now live in cities and this is expected to rise to 60% by 2030 going by United Nations estimates.

Yet trees in urban areas are often under the greatest pressure (from increased summer temperatures and pollution

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levels to compacted soils, intensive development, salt contamination and vandalism to name a few).

Consequently, in the UK at least, tree numbers have been steadily declining (Britt and Johnston 2008) in our urban areas. However, with increasing urbanisation there is an ever increasing need to incorporate the role of the urban forest into long term planning and climate adaptation strategies, in order to improve the environmental quality of where we live and work.

Yet, we know very little about our urban forests, how they are growing, what they are composed of, the tree species, biodiversity and age classes for example. Generally, the majority of Local Authorities (LA's) in the UK have scant information (Britt and Johnston 2008) of the tree stock and this is normally only on public realm trees.

Few doubt that individual tree management is important in our towns and cities but if we completely neglect the wider 'urban forest' view we inevitably miss the bigger picture. Its much overused but the old saying 'seeing the wood for the trees' is a both a wise and timely one for urban foresters, tree mangers, planners and other allied professions.

Next time I will be looking at one of the simplest ways to start investigating the urban forest, analysing canopy cover.

**Kenton Rogers** is a Chartered Forester and Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. His current projects include Treeconomics, a social enterprise that engages with public bodies, research organisations communities and commercial businesses to highlight the value of trees.

Email [kenton@treeconomics.co.uk](mailto:kenton@treeconomics.co.uk)

The Urban Forest; Reigate pictured from the South Downs.

