



An Ecocentric or Anthropocentric Approach to Urban Trees

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The recent uproar and debates about trees being cut down on public and private property in our village made me wonder: Who is right and who is wrong? Aldo Leopold states that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community." By this he means that whatever we do, should aim to protect the balance and harmony within the natural world, considering the inter-connectedness of all species and ecosystems.

Furthermore, our decisions should reflect a deep respect for the intrinsic value of all living things and encourage ethical behaviour that considers the impact on the environment.

Our village is not a natural world but is within a natural world and it does have an impact on the environment. To define the issue: an ecocentric approach to urban trees prioritises the intrinsic value of nature, while an anthropocentric approach prioritises human needs and benefits. I believe that neither is inherently "better" as each addresses different problems. The real question is about what we want our village to be, an ecosystem that includes humans, or a human system that merely hosts fragments of nature and does not really support the ecological systems and processes of the region?

Urban trees are living parts of a wider ecosystem, not merely decorative objects or tools. An ecocentric view values them for supporting biodiversity, soil stability, microclimates, and long-term resilience. An anthropocentric view values

them for improving human life through shade, cooling, well-being, safety, and property value. Good urban tree management must balance both: trees matter as living co-inhabitants and because they benefit people. If they do not satisfy both criteria, must they be removed from the town environment?

However, it can be argued that a city that prioritises human convenience over ecological integrity undermines its own future. Ecocentric planning promotes species diversity, supports pollinators, and builds climate resilience. When we choose trees based on ecological fit, aesthetic value and maintenance convenience, we create stable, self-sustaining urban forests. Nature has value independent of human use. Trees are not "infrastructure," they are living participants in an urban ecosystem.

The question is not whether a species is lovable (or a utility) but whether it plays a role in the integrity and stability of the community of life. This statement by Leopold emphasises that ethical decisions should prioritise the health, stability, and integrity of the biotic community rather than human preferences or aesthetics.

Leopold argued that every species has intrinsic ecological value, and the correctness of our actions is determined by its effect on the interconnected web of life, including soil, water, plants, animals, and humans. We are part of the natural community, and must thus act to preserve its integrity, stability, and beauty, regardless of whether

individual species are considered appealing or charismatic.

Any action or decision we make with regards to trees in our town should uphold and protect the balance and harmony within our surrounding natural world. The inter-connectedness of species and ecosystems should be honoured and preserved. While it may initially seem contrary to our human-centric view, ecocentrism promotes the idea that the well-being of the entire biotic community should be the focus of our ethical considerations, rather than prioritising the interests of us humans alone.

By understanding that our actions, not only with regard to trees, have implications for the entire biotic community, our choices must align with the principles of integrity, stability, and beauty. It pushes us to recognise that our well-being is intricately tied to the well-being of the biotic community as a whole. By nurturing and protecting the natural systems upon which we depend, we are ultimately safeguarding our own survival and ensuring a sustainable future for generations to come.

However, the question remains: Should urban forestry prioritise the intrinsic value of nature, or the needs and benefits of humans?

Questions? Contact the Sedgefield Tree Committee: on 082 332 2206 or sedgeprecioustrees@gmail.com