

Valuing and managing VETERAN TREES

A sneak preview at the VETree
training material



What is a veteran tree?

If you asked 10 different people to define a veteran tree, you would probably get 10 different definitions, all of which contain at least a grain of truth. The definition of a veteran tree is not precise. Many people tend to focus on the chronological age of a tree however a specific age limit cannot be defined, since this will differ very much between tree species: a 150 year old birch is ancient, while a 150 year old oak is still a youngster. Instead, it is better to look at features about the tree such as holes, hollows, decaying wood or an obvious generally gnarled shape. Another clue might be the tree's historical and cultural background.

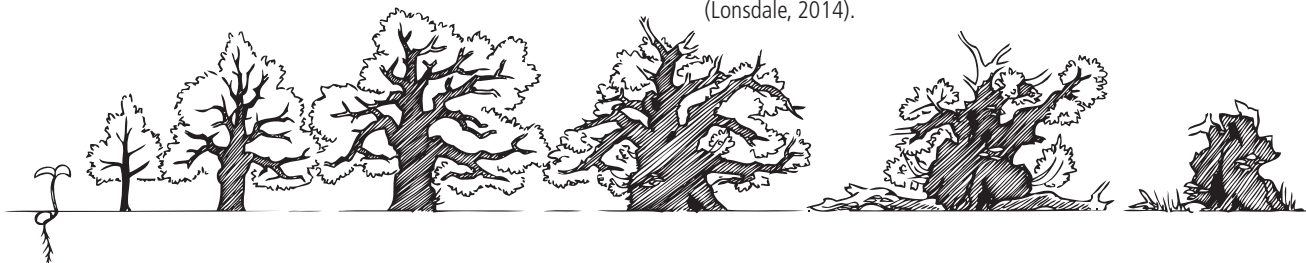
Closely related to the above 'age definition' is the 'life stage definition'. Most people are very familiar with young and mature trees. But we often forget that the life of a tree does not suddenly stop when it has reached its maximum size. A tree slowly ages, loses some vigour, sheds a limb and 'grows down' (i.e. it may become shorter in height). In fact this post-mature or ancient stage may well be the longest phase of its life', although in reality it is difficult to determine precisely.

But a tree does not need to be very old to show veteran characteristics. As a result of its environment, natural damage or active management, it can start to show the features of old age when much younger. These trees are not ancient, but they certainly are veterans. This is the most commonly accepted definition nowadays: a veteran tree is a tree which has markedly ancient characteristics, irrespective of chronological age. The term ancient is applied specifically to trees that are ancient in years (Lonsdale, 2014).

'Ancient characteristics' may include decaying wood in the trunk, branches or roots, fungal fruiting bodies, hollows and a naturally retrenching crown which is gradually becoming smaller and smaller. These features are not a sign that the tree is about to die, in fact a veteran tree may stay alive and healthy for many decades and often centuries and even dying veteran

trees may endure for many decades.

Trees may be of interest not because of their age but because of their historical significance. They may reflect past land use, be connected with a person or an event or be part of a designed landscape.



The mature stage may well be the longest stage in the life of a tree (drawing from Read, 2000 adapted from original by Neville Fay)



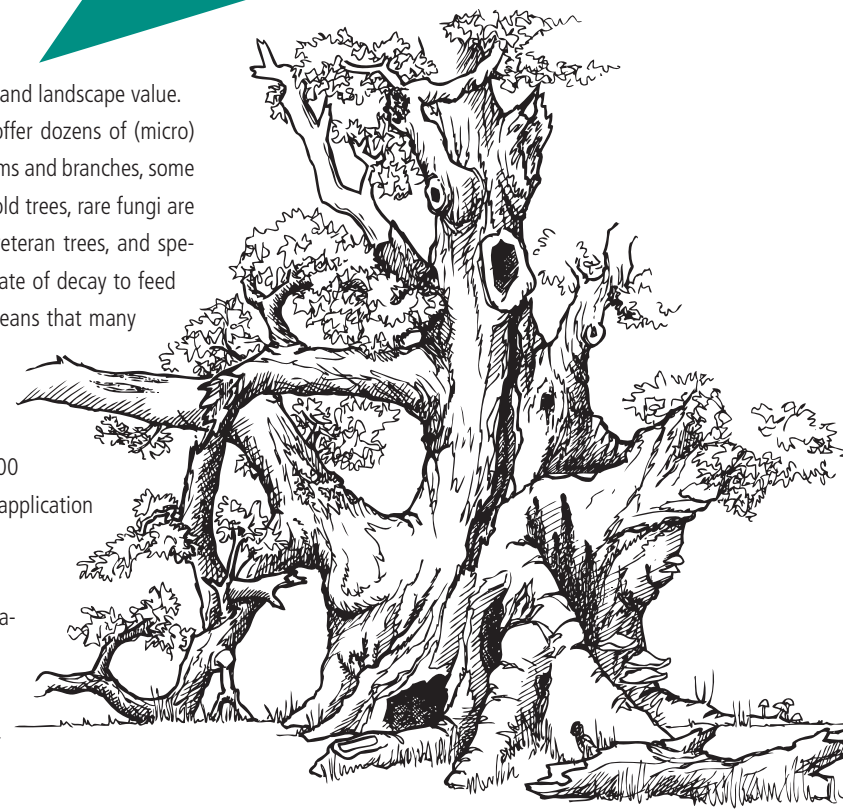
This oak pollard associated with a stone cross is both a veteran and a heritage tree. Avenues may have both biological and heritage values. (pictures Tom Joye)

Be sure to appreciate and value these irreplaceable trees whenever you meet them.

Why are veteran trees important?

Veteran trees have a very high ecological, historical and landscape value. The veteran tree characteristics mentioned above offer dozens of (micro) habitats for wildlife. Bats and birds live in hollow stems and branches, some lichens species can only live on the rugged bark of old trees, rare fungi are specialised in slowly decaying the heart wood of veteran trees, and specialised insect larvae need wood in an advanced state of decay to feed on. Veteran trees are rare in the landscape. This means that many of the associated specialised species are also rare. That is why some veteran tree landscapes and their associated species are now protected, both nationally and Europe wide through the Natura 2000 Directive. However there are inconsistencies in the application of the Directive across different countries.

Of course veteran trees are not only important in nature reserves and Natura 2000 designated areas. Veteran trees in parks, gardens and urban areas deserve equal attention as they provide important refuges for wildlife.



Veteran trees offer dozens of microhabitats for wildlife. Can you find them? (drawing from Read, 2000)

Apart from their ecological value, many veteran trees also have a cultural and historical value. Many ancient trees have grown to be so old because of active management by man. For example our ancestors pollarded many trees for wood and fodder and they depended heavily on these trees for their every day needs. Ancient and veteran trees still reflect this past management and can teach us how our ancestors lived and worked. Other trees are associated with an important event, a person or a place. Throughout Europe, people also planted trees to commemorate festive occasions like a wedding or birth or a new reign after a revolution. Trees also marked boundaries and corners of arable fields.

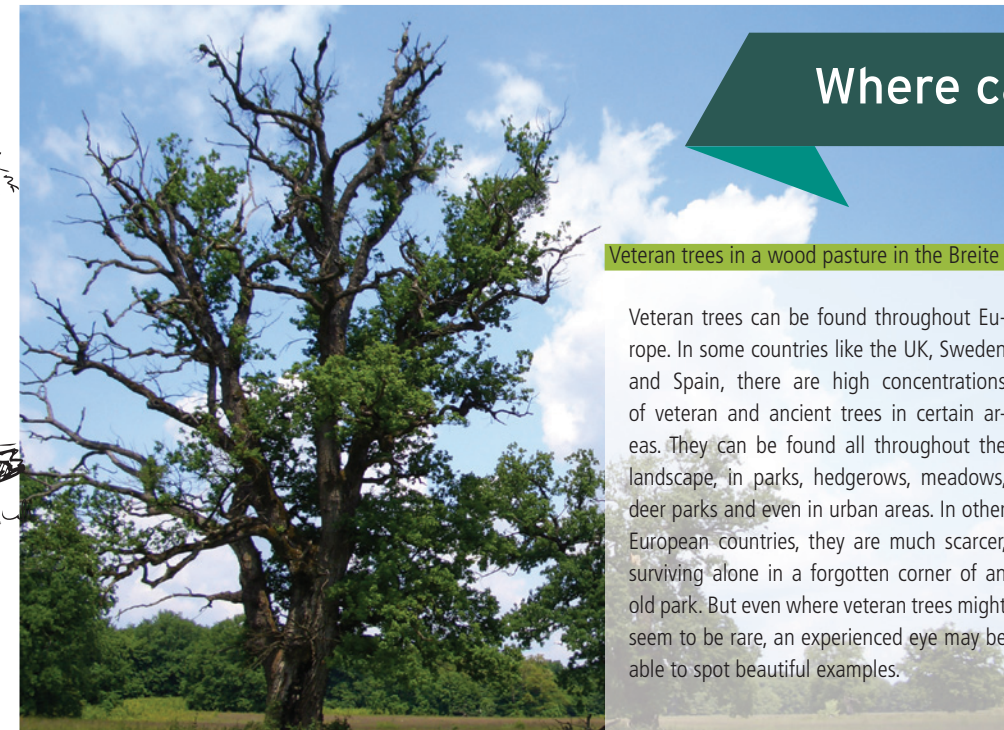
Since veteran trees are by definition only replaceable over a very long period, it is crucial to properly manage existing veteran trees and prolong their lives, at least until a new generation of trees can replace them.



This young hornbeam pollard marks the corner between two arable fields. It has the potential of becoming a veteran tree over time. (picture Tom Joye)

Where can I find veteran trees?

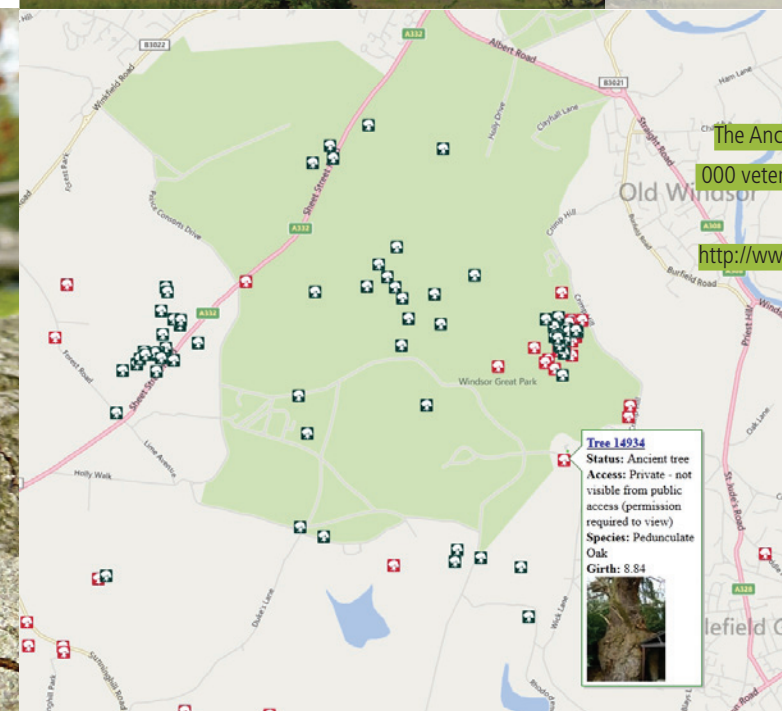
Veteran trees in a wood pasture in the Breite Nature Reserve, Romania. (picture Luminita Holban)



Veteran trees can be found throughout Europe. In some countries like the UK, Sweden and Spain, there are high concentrations of veteran and ancient trees in certain areas. They can be found all throughout the landscape, in parks, hedgerows, meadows, deer parks and even in urban areas. In other European countries, they are much scarcer, surviving alone in a forgotten corner of an old park. But even where veteran trees might seem to be rare, an experienced eye may be able to spot beautiful examples.

A special type of veteran tree landscapes deserves a bit more attention here: the wood pastures and wooded meadows. These landscapes with open grown (veteran) trees surrounded by extensively grazed or cut grassland, are probably very similar to a landscape type that existed all over Europe (Vera, 2000). In some places the trees were pollarded, cut for their foliage or fuel wood. This kind of landscape where trees grew old in open conditions and where the wildlife evolved together with the trees have extremely high biodiversity values today as well as often being of great cultural importance. Those existing relics (or equivalents) of this ancient landscape should be cherished.

Can you spot the beetles that are usually associated with veteran trees? One might be harder than the other (left: Rhagium sycophanta, picture Ola Bengtsson; right: Rosalia alpina, picture Santiago Pagola)



The Ancient Tree Hunt has over 100 000 veteran trees in the UK surveyed and mapped (screenshot <http://www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk/>)



In a lot of countries or regions, veteran trees have been surveyed and listed in databases which may also include, for example Champion Trees, Notable trees and Heritage Trees ... More and more of these databases are accessible online, so if you want to visit some of our natural monuments, it's well worth trying to find a veteran tree database for your area. A fine example of such a veteran tree database is the Ancient Tree Hunt in the UK, with more than 100 000 trees listed to date, or Tradportalen.se in Sweden with over 300 000 trees.

Why the VETree project?

During the last decades and even centuries, we have lost many veteran trees throughout Europe. Firstly, ongoing economic, agricultural and forestry development have led to a drastic change in land use. Secondly, in rural areas, millions of veteran pollard trees have been abandoned after centuries of active management for wood and fodder. Veteran trees in rural areas and the surrounding landscape are no longer managed traditionally and the trees get overgrown by secondary woodland or are removed in favour of agricultural efficiency. This process is still ongoing (often with EU agricultural funding) in certain countries or regions in Europe, for example in Spain and Romania.

In more urban areas, veteran trees are often damaged or removed under the pretext of safety. Ironically most of the 'risk' is situated in the veteran tree features that account the highest biodiversity values: decaying wood, hollows, lvsarge horizontal limbs, fungal activity, ... 'Standard' tree risk assessments do not consider the specific challenges of dealing with veteran trees, usually not intentionally, but because of a lack of knowledge.



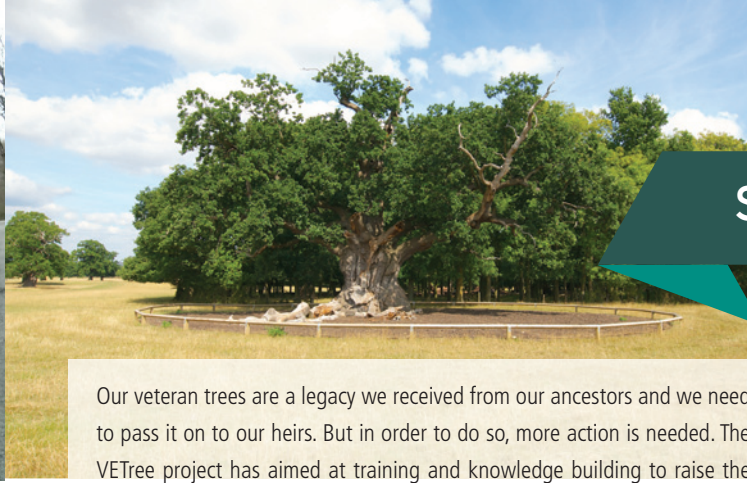
Probably because of lack of knowledge, half of this veteran tree was cut away in a failed attempt to make the tree safe. (picture Mikel Belasko)

All these processes have led to a dramatic loss of veteran tree ecosystems throughout Europe and the accompanying loss in biodiversity and in management skills and knowledge.

The VETree project is aimed at spreading best practice in veteran tree management by training and connecting people throughout Europe. Many more efforts are needed, especially at a policy level. As a consequence of VETree there is now quality training material in 6 languages freely available for everybody who wants to learn or to teach others about veteran tree management.

The VETree project in a nutshell

VETree is an acronym for 'Vocational Education and Training on Veteran Trees', a European project set up by 5 partner organisations that ran between November 2012 and October 2014. The main goal of the project was to collect all available knowledge about veteran tree management and collate that in a basic training course for arborists, foresters, urban tree managers, landscape architects, etc. The training material was tested thoroughly and a further course prepared to train others to deliver this foundation level course. More than 45 VETree trainers were trained during the pilot workshops. They will 'spread the word' in their own organisations and countries and organise basic workshops independently. The training material, including videos and basic e-learning support are available on the VETree website.



Our veteran trees are a legacy we received from our ancestors and we need to pass it on to our heirs. But in order to do so, more action is needed. The VETree project has aimed at training and knowledge building to raise the profile of veteran trees, the next step is to reinforce our policies influencing veteran trees.

We would like to call on all of you to:

Improve policy

- Grant veteran trees and veteran tree landscapes a protected status, be it locally, nationally or European
- Strengthen agriculture, arboriculture and forestry policies (if possible on an EU-level) to encourage best practice in veteran tree management.
- Offer veteran trees better legal protection, also on a European scale. This can be done by extending the Natura 2000 designation to include more veteran tree landscapes (like in Scandinavia).
- Provide mechanisms to support landowners financially for managing their veteran trees.

Increase survey effort

- Survey and list veteran trees. We need to know where our veteran trees are in order to protect them.

Securing the future for veteran trees

Promote better management

- Manage veteran trees according to the best practice in order to extend their life until a new generation of trees can take over.
- Retain dead and dying veteran trees as much as possible.
- Take into account associated fungi, lichens, mosses, insects and other wildlife when managing veteran trees.
- Encourage best practice in veteran tree management through the promotion of the VETree courses and materials.

Protect trees in urban areas

- Pay special attention to old trees in urban areas, especially in development areas and on construction sites.
- Develop specific tree risk assessment tools for assessing veteran trees.

Think to the future

- Plant more new trees to take over the role of the veteran trees when they eventually die, ensuring that they have enough space to do so.
- Reinforce veteran tree hotspots by creating wood pasture with young, open grown trees that will be the ancient trees of the future.
- Buffer important sites from surrounding intensive land use.

Improve knowledge

- Promote research about veteran tree management and biodiversity.
- Train yourself and others in veteran tree management, especially arborists and tree managers. Note that veteran tree management is very different from 'standard' management for younger trees.

Where can I find the training material?



Training material was tested extensively during pilot workshops in all partner countries. (picture Tom Joye)

During the VETree project, training material for a 1-day basic workshop in veteran tree management was developed. The training material consists of presentations, exercises, group work, case studies, field exercises and a detailed handbook written by a leading expert. All training material was tested extensively during pilot workshops in all partner countries and is available in 6 languages: English, Swedish, Dutch, Romanian, Spanish and Basque.

To multiply the effect of the project's outcome, we aimed at trainers rather than at end users of the basic training. During 3-day 'Train the trainers'

workshops, potential trainers were provided with detailed training material so that they can share their knowledge within their own organisation and to organise basic workshops independently.

The training material for the basic workshop will be available for trainers from the VETree website (www.vetree.eu).

Additionally, 8 training videos were compiled to support the indoor training. Topics are:

- Techniques for crown reducing a veteran tree
- Halo clearance for veteran trees
- The importance of the land around a veteran tree
- Common sense risk management of veteran trees
- Creation of decaying wood habitats
- Management of veteran fruit trees
- Management of veteran pollards still in a regular cycle of cutting
- and 2 lectures by David Lonsdale

These videos were extended with basic e-learning material to allow for blended learning.

If you would like to have more information on VETree training, visit

www.vetree.eu

or contact one of the VETree project partners.

Pro Natura

Pro Natura is a cooperative research and consultancy company based in Göteborg, Sweden. Pro Natura works primarily with issues related to nature conservation and has a wide level of competence within the majority of fields within terrestrial ecology.



Inverde is a forum for green expertise based in Belgium, acting for the Flemish Government's Nature and Forestry Agency and for the nature and forestry industry as a whole. One of inverde's main activities is supporting knowledge building for all our partners.



The Ancient Tree Forum is a UK based NGO which started in 1998 as a loose group of colleagues who enjoyed standing underneath ancient trees and discussing them. Ancient Tree Forum tries to inspire all stakeholders in veteran tree management through their field visits and publications.



Amigos de los Árboles Viejos (Friends of the Ancient Trees) is an NGO focussing on the conservation of ancient trees and the associated wildlife in the North of Spain, mainly Navarra and the Basque Country. Their main activities focus on knowledge building on veteran tree management and conservation.



Societatea Progresul Silvic (The Forest Progress Society) is a Romanian NGO working in forestry, environmental protection and biodiversity conservation. Progresul Silvic also manages two large Natura 2000 sites with veteran trees.

Supported by:



The European Arboricultural Council is a forum bringing together delegates from arboricultural associations throughout Europe. The EAC runs the European Tree Worker and European Tree Technician certification scheme.



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Based on information from:

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- Lonsdale, D., Ancient and other veteran trees – further guidance on management, 2014
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- Vera, F., Grazing Ecology and Forest History, 2000

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