Sacred urban nature – trees and cultural ecosystem services in Bangalore, India

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Abstract

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Spiritual linkages between people and nature are usually studied in rural and "traditional" contexts. Here we illustrate how cultural values embedded in religious belief systems are ascribed to urban trees in Bangalore, India. In this rapidly developing IT-hub of South East Asia, sacred trees are not only commonly found throughout the city, but the values and religious practices associated with them remain respected and provide the only efficient protection of urban tree cover in the city formerly known as the Garden City.

A survey of sacred trees in 3+3 sites in older and more recently developed parts of Bangalore revealed that sacred trees provide pockets of protected green cover in the highly urbanized landscape. Sacred trees were generally large and native to south India. Most of them (92%) belonged to a few species that are known as sacred in an Indian context (e.g. Ficus religiosa or Azadirachta indica), but location at a temple site or religious practices can ascribe protection also to other species. We also found that certain trees have heritage value, as remnant village symbols or meeting places, or as associated with childhood memories, in particular in the old parts of Bangalore. Two-thirds of the trees were managed by a temple trust, whereas the last third were managed informally by the people who come to the tree for worship.

In Bangalore, the respect and protection of certain trees is upheld by religious formal governance structures but also by informal expressions of religious practices. Other studies have shown that urban tree protection engages environmental activism in Bangalore. The cultural values associated with certain trees are explicit in the society and appears respected also by people of different religious beliefs. Few studies have covered cultural values associated with urban trees, in particular across (and within) different belief systems and social-ecological contexts. More research is needed to better understand how appreciation of cultural ecosystem services can motivate, and catalyze change towards, urban ecosystem stewardship.

Keywords: Transformation, Stewardship, Urban, Ecosystem Services

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