

TREE IN FESTIVALS

Adapted from the Introduction to the Civic Knowledge Project/Washington Park Conservancy Tree In, held October 18, 2008 in the Washington Park Arboretum

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Welcome, some of you may be wondering what on earth you are in for—what is a Tree In? Well, at one level, it is just an excuse for something for which we should not need an excuse—namely, getting together as friends and neighbors in a beautiful public park on a beautiful autumn day to enjoy the wonders of nature and of each other. Tree Ins are celebrations of life, of our life together, on our planet.

But, just as trees are a bit more than “big plants with sticks running up the middle of them,” so too, Tree Ins are meant to be a bit more. They are meant to be celebrations of trees that underscore how we urgently need to celebrate trees.

Many of you probably know the wonderful story by Dr. Seuss titled *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1999). It features a strange character, the Once-ler, who ruins a beautiful forested area by cutting down all of the trees (the Truffula trees) in order to produce unnecessary long underwear style garments called “thneeds.” The Once-ler keeps being confronted by a weird little character who pops out of the cut down trees, the Lorax, who “speaks for the trees” and tries to warn him that he is ruining nature. The Once-ler does not listen, cuts down all the trees and despoils the environment, and thus ultimately puts himself out of business. Everything he did depended on the trees, and yet somehow, he had failed to appreciate that simple fact.

Like Rachel Carson’s environmentalist classic, *Silent Spring*, *The Lorax* was a timely book ahead of its time (it was first published in 1971). Today, one can find many very big, very serious books that carry the same message as the Lorax. One of my favorites, by British naturalist Colin Tudge (and from which I drew the simple definition of a “tree” given above), is called simply *The Tree: A Natural History of What Trees Are, How They Live, and Why They Matter* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005). As this book shows, too many of us are essentially Once-lers in a world like the one the Once-ler created: “Humanity is in a mess. The statistics are simple and stark: a billion chronically undernourished, a billion in slums (and growing), more than a billion who live on less than two dollars a day.

Even worse, because potentially more final, is the collapse of the earth itself, the place where we live. Soil, air, sea, lakes, aquifers, and rivers: all are under stress. Above all, potentially the coup de grace, lies the reality of climate change.” (p. 365). Like Dr. Seuss, Tudge uses trees as the entry point for enhancing environmental awareness generally, cogently observing that: “Trees are at the heart of all the necessary debates: ecological, social, economic, political, moral, religious.” (p. 368).

Indeed, there is nothing in, for example, the Chicago Public School’s Environmental Action Plan (quite a good one), that could not be approached through the subject of trees. The great forests in the Amazon and the Congo truly are “the Lungs of the Earth,” and very largely responsible for maintaining the atmosphere we need. No account of the environmental crisis, particularly with respect to greenhouse gases and climate change, can afford to leave out the importance of those trees. And some of the most effective illustrations of the reality of global warming come from the blighted pine forests in North America, which are blighted and dying because winters are no longer sufficiently cold to keep the pine beetle at bay. When young people are learning about the components of the Environmental Action Plan, and why we need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by, say, biking or walking to school, eliminating car lines and idling school buses, etc., the points can always be driven home by pointing to the fate of the trees, of the great forests that clean so much of our air and house so much of the earth’s critical biodiversity. As a recent Conservation International bulletin emphasized, the frightening fact is that: “The earth’s forests are being burned and cleared like never before. In fact, every 20 minutes, 1,200 acres of forest are destroyed, pouring 180,000 tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere.” As I speak to you here, the earth has just lost a forest many times the size of this arboretum.

But the trees right here in our own backyards and local parks, which are often our oldest and largest neighbors, also make vital contributions to our well-being as individuals and communities. If you harbor any doubts about their importance, please contact the Morton Arboretum’s Community Tree Advocate, Edith Makra, who can come do an engaging presentation of the evidence for the importance of the trees around us. They clean the air (100 trees can remove 37 tons of carbon dioxide and 248 pounds of other air pollutants per year), cool us in the summer heat (those 100 trees could help you save 20% on air conditioning costs), reduce

crime (including domestic violence), enhance property values (large specimens can add 10%), help children develop (as the University of Illinois Human-Environment Research Laboratory demonstrated, “Kids who spend more time outside end up paying more attention inside”), and are even good for business, just by being the natural wonders they are. These facts are all drawn from or supported by literature from the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Forest Service researchers.

And of course, when it comes to teaching young people environmentalism and the values of sustainability, trees make it easy. Kids love trees. They love being outside with trees, in trees, around trees, picking up leaves, etc. You do not need a fancy fixed-structure playground in order to get kids outside playing constructively. In fact, all the evidence suggests that free green spaces with loose parts, where kids can engage in nature activities, explore, imagine, and wonder, is the better format. Green unstructured play is the vital element in cultivating the root of both philosophy and environmental awareness—that “sense of wonder” that Rachel Carson made the subject of her last book, a children’s book with that title (New York: Harper Collins, 1965, 1998). Carson’s message—namely, that with children, environmental education only needs a nudge and an opportunity, not a push—is also at the heart of one of the most influential environmentalist works of recent years, Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2006), though it is presented there with an even great sense of urgency. Louv’s book, subtitled *Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, has launched a movement, the Leave No Child Inside movement, in response to the truly frightening facts he presents suggesting that a wide range of childhood maladies—especially ADHD and obesity—are related to generational shifts in the amount of time spent outdoors in creative, free unstructured play in green spaces, bonding with nature. The “device dependence” (TV, DVD, VCR, etc.) that we see around us today, with children spending long hours inside, is not only keeping our future generations from developing the environmental awareness and sensitivity they will need. It is literally making them unhealthy. Needlessly.

Thus, we should, all of us, try to be like the Lorax: “I am the Lorax and I speak for the trees.” The trees will make it that much easier for future generations to learn what they need to know in order to build a sustainable future.

But in truth, we urgently need to be even better than the Lorax, when it comes to speaking for the trees. The Lorax did not persuade the Once-ler to convert to more

sustainable practices. We must. There is no more urgent task, not only for scientists, but also for artists, writers, philosophers, and of course ordinary citizens. As another naturalist, Donald Culross Peattie, put it: “The orator who knows the way to the country’s salvation and doesn’t know that the breath of life he draws was blown into his nostrils by green leaves, had better spare his breath.” (Quoted in the wonderful book by Alice Thomas Vitale, *Leaves in Myth, Magic & Medicine* [New York: Steward, Tabori, and Chang, 1997], p. 12).

Fortunately for us, we have some great people around today who are doing a wonderful job of speaking for the trees. Perhaps the greatest of them all is the Kenyan (s)hero, Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, who is responsible for the planting of literally millions of trees across Kenya and around the world. Her story is a story that every young person should know. Not many people belong in the company of Nelson Mandela, but she clearly does, as a hero of democracy, women’s equality, and the environment, and I hope that her works—her memoir *Unbowed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) and her account of the movement she founded *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (New York: Lantern Books, 2006)—are in every single school library in this city and everywhere else. The Mission Statement of the Green Belt Movement is one that we should all endorse: “To mobilize community consciousness for self-determination, equity, improved livelihood securities and environmental conservation using trees as the entry point” (*The Green Belt Movement*, p. 112).

Ultimately, Maathai’s message is about the effectiveness and urgency of empowering ordinary people to work on behalf of their own freedom and the sustainability of the planet. Her message, using trees as an entry point, is true of many other forms of environmentalism—namely, citizens cannot count on the government or the experts to solve all the problems. There are simply not enough experts to go around, even for purposes of mapping the biodiversity of the earth, and the best governmental policies will be those informed by an active citizenry. The fate of the earth rests with all of us: we must all learn how to care for and protect the earth, doing what we can locally to help both locally and globally. The Green Belt Movement is something that you, all of you, can use to make your lives better here and now, and to help future generations. That is a very positive

message for our young people. You can visit the Green Belt website at: <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/>

But if you would welcome a bit of help getting off the ground—or out in touch with it—please do let me know. The Civic Knowledge Project’s Sustainability Partners will be glad to help. After all, if we are going to speak for the trees, we had better get to know them and learn how to advocate for them. And we are working with some terrific tree advocates—the previously mentioned Edith Makra, from the Morton Arboretum, but also Mark Duntemann, from Natural Path Urban Forestry Consultants, Robin Cline, from the Garfield Park Conservatory, and many individuals from the Chicago Botanic Garden, particularly Anna Viertel, a specialist in school gardens. Moreover, the CKP would be glad to help you do your own Tree In, discovering and celebrating the trees near you and putting together some fun but highly educational activities for all ages. You can reach me at 773-834-3929 x 1, or rschultz@uchicago.edu. Please visit our website: <http://civicknowledge.uchicago.edu>

I would like to close with this passage, from another work that every school library should feature (actually, all of the works cited here should be in our school libraries, if they are printed on recycled paper), *The Simple Act of Planting a Tree: Healing Your Neighborhood, Your City, and Your World* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc. 1990), by TreePeople, with Andy and Katie Lipkis:

“Our work feeds us. Planting and caring for trees, taking on challenges bigger than ourselves, building bridges of cooperation, solving problems creatively, seeing communities grow and strengthen, watching people come into their power, having a purpose, and knowing that we have made a difference in the lives of others produces a satisfaction so deep and fulfilling we feel like millionaires. In a sense, we are. Instead of dollars earned, millions of trees are planted and nurtured, lives are touched, and kids are turned on to caring.” (p. xi).