

People and Oaks¹

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Abstract

While technical knowledge of oaks, acorns, habitat, wildlife, and woodland environments is evolving and a sought-after field of study, there are profound linkages, at once humanistic and artistic, where it comes to people and oaks. Looking at six distinct facets of humans and oak woodlands, this essay suggests that the bonds of people to place can be mediated by the trees in our immediate surroundings. And as human companions in a living biogeography, oaks are especially recognized and significant.

Key words: art, human impacts, humanities, working woodlands

And what's an oak worth to you?

What is a given oak worth to a respectful audience? That question is one for the ages, and certainly there are oaks of such formidable maturity and productivity that many an answer is plausible. While the varieties of *Quercus* singled out for attention vary with locale, examples are notable, and often they are historic: The huge Whistler Tree in Águas de Moura in Portugal's Alentejo is a cork oak said to have yielded a million bottle corks; the King Oak of Charleville Forest, Ireland, may be 800 years old; a Portuguese ilex oak visited in 1916 by the geographer J. Russell Smith dropped a yearly average of 720 liters of acorns (Smith 1916); the Major Oak in Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire, England, is, according to legend, where Robin Hood and his outlaw band slept; the Angel Oak has its own park on Johns Island near Charleston, South Carolina. And although the 14 trees that once made up the grove of Council Oaks in Austin, Texas, are whittled down now to just one exemplar, the Treaty Oak, that is still a respected feature from Comanche and Tonkawa Tribal history. Long-living and tending toward the spectacular, oaks command respect, especially when they stand solitary and unapologetic. Botanists, arborists, wildlife biologists—practicing scientists, in short—tend to brusqueness in discussing their subjects, but the public at large is given to the emphatic when describing trees they admire. The territory where arts and humanities meet ascetic science can be fertile ground, if that intersection is recognized and respected. This discussion is about such a dovetailing of people and oaks (fig. 1).

Oaks can be tricky to work with, however. In October 2014 the University of Michigan, relentlessly expanding its top-ten rated law school, acted on a galling concern: What was to be done with a 300-year-old, 19.8 m (65 foot) tall, burr oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*, for sticklers among you) that stood squarely in the expanded footprint of the new building? Bringing together a brain trust comprising the university's landscape architects, a passel of engineers, gardeners, the University President, and for all we will ever know, the entire staff and student body of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, they elected to uproot the oak to move it. Hassles? Heinous. Cost? A neat \$400,000. Return? Beyond a dollar figure, a better answer is likely priceless good will (Householder 2014, Phillips 2014).

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Figure 1—As a symbol of permanence, stability, strength, with profound ties to past times, the oak is a potent landscape feature, as here at the Hacienda-Milpitas House, alongside Mission San Antonio de Padua in Fort Hunter-Liggett, California. (Photograph by Paul F. Starrs, 2011)

My theme, as it was solicited, is “People and Oaks.” Later contributors to this symposium build on this theme with history and paleoecology, wildlife, cost-benefit analysis, genomics, wildlife effects and pests, ecosystem services, international perspectives, and much else that is value-added. My goal, however, is to suggest something else, that the working landscapes embodied by oak woodlands, wherever they grow, are deserving of the attention that poets, arborists, sawyers, graziers-with-livestock, planners and polemicists have lavished on the genus *Quercus* and the places they grow. I could do this in any number of ways, as indeed I once did a dozen years ago (Starrs 2002). But no doubt like all of you, I much appreciate how our perspectives on oaks and their landscapes change with time. And where oaks are concerned, that element of time carries weight. I’m going to encapsulate my narrative in six short accounts, each if not a narrative then perhaps a parable of people and their relationship with oaks.

Each story examines a different facet of the human relationship with oaks; these links can be emotional, economic, functional, elemental, aesthetic. The historical geographer Donald Meinig once suggested that “geography represents an age-old and essential strategy for thinking about large and complex matters” and we are hardly in a position to present a contrary argument (Meinig 1996).

Oaks as sustenance and strategic resource

Sustenance and strategic concerns are a longstanding question with oaks. Their products—variously wood, mast, acorns, shelter, aesthetics—are of sizable interest and still greater value. To traditional products—oak planks in the ship’s hull that protected the *USS Constitution* (better known as “Old Ironsides”)—we in 21st century California would add ecosystem services, acorns, grazing land, wildlife habitat, and a bow toward the role played by acorns for wildlife in pre-European California, an importance recognized by California Native Americans who, evidence suggests, were active managers of the woodlands, and certainly drew on tree products: acorns ground for flour; leaves and mast for feed; habitat for wildlife that sustained hunting human populations (Anderson 2005). “People and oaks,” indeed.

Alongside such uses came to be strategic concern about the value of oaks. As a building material, oaks were significant; branches, scrub oaks, and acorns fed livestock in Spanish-Mexican and Anglo times. Exotic oak varieties were introduced to bolster the species found in California (Campos and others 2013). But by the late nineteenth century, and through the 1940s, the products of oaks, whether native and introduced, were a near-obsession (fig. 2).



Figure 2—The removal of cork bark from *Q. suber* is no easy process, and in Spain and Portugal cork stripping is considered as much art as manual labor. These cork strippers are, according to the photograph’s original caption, student and staff in the Department of Forestry at UC Berkeley, dating from about 1940. (From the Fritz-Metcalf Photographic Collection, Marion Koshland Bioscience and Natural Resources Library, UC Berkeley, photograph accession number: 2701b)

As an example, one particular concern was the cork oak, native to Spain and Portugal. Cork, an outer bark stripped every 8– to 12–plus years, was a valued oak product, but one found around the Mediterranean Basin, and, though introduced, rarely in North America. Hobbyists during Revolutionary times including Thomas Jefferson sought to establish cork trees (*Quecus suber*) in the United States, but attempts in earnest to introduce cork oaks started in the 1870s in California, where *Q. suber* turned out to do remarkably well. Efforts at the land-grant university, the University of California headquartered in Berkeley, were led by foresters, including the prodigious and multitasking Woodbridge Metcalf, an extension forester who

took up cork oak introduction efforts begun in the 1870s in the Southland, Napa, Sonoma, and in the upper Sacramento Valley, and redoubled efforts, greatly expanding sites. A cadre of test plantings, research done on earlier-established cork oaks, test-stripping of bark, and harvested cork usability tests continued through the 1950s, but efforts were largely abandoned as pines and redwoods took over in the attention of foresters, and apprehensions faded about countries along an unstable Mediterranean fringe peremptorily ceasing cork shipments (Brooks 1997). And to be fair, aside from a crucial role of well-formed cork plugs turned into wine stoppers, there were other insulators, flooring materials, and wall surfaces coming onto the scene, though none with a warmth and intrinsic interest inherent to cork oak bark.



Figure 3—Nineteenth-century photographs can open a startling window into the past, as here where downtown Oakland, California, is seen from the third floor of the Wilcox Hotel, once at the center of the city. (Photograph courtesy of the Society of California Pioneers, Lawrence & Houseworth Collection, date approximately 1865)

Other attributes of the oak, in California and elsewhere, are inevitably linked to the attractive qualities of the Mediterranean-type ecosystem, with its summer-dry, winter-wet (such is the hope) climate. It is no accident that lands fringing the Mediterranean Sea, California, Chile, South Africa, and western Australia have strong proponents, sizable populations, and a serious fan base: they also readily support wine grapes (good ones), olives, sizable food production ... and oaks. But *Quercus* are not particularly choosy in their preferred habitat: Mexico retains the world's highest diversity of oak species, and its climate is more equable year-round than the summer-dry Mediterranean type.

Oaks as aesthetic features

As aesthetic contributions, giving visual contrast, pleasure, high regard, and even wealth to an adopted landscape, oaks are longstanding landscape features. In consideration of that argument now, take a single city: Oakland, California. While the reputation and perhaps even notoriety of Oakland today suggests a benighted history of urban blight, that is unfair and a canard. Oakland, incorporated in 1852, cherished its namesake tree, even as the Central Pacific Railroad, the ferry moles pointing precariously toward San Francisco and the South Bay, and a booming distribution network from city center to streetcar suburbs made the city a vital hub (fig. 3).

Photographs from the Lawrence & Houseworth Collection, housed at the Society of California Pioneers, showed the place of the hardwood trees in the Oakland city firmament and sense of place. Much the same could be said of adjoining valleys and agricultural endeavors: it was no accident that oaks appear in movies made by the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company, based in Niles Canyon (Alameda County), with films for a time starring Charlie Chaplin and “Broncho Billy” Anderson.

The language associated with these photographs of Oakland from 100 to 150 years ago speaks to permanence, an embrace of variety, and enthusiasm for an indigenous landscape where the Mediterranean was an object of respect.

Oaks as cultural objects



Figure 4—Oaks provide identity, in city names, for streets and byways, and here, for a small ranch along Highway 1 in Monterey County, California. The “rancho” is an evocation of the Hispanic heritage of California; “encina” is the Castillian Spanish term for the holm oak (*Q. ilex*) but can be used with less specificity to describe any oak or oak woodland (an *encinar*). (Photograph by Paul F. Starrs, 2011)

As cultural artifacts, oaks are nicely rooted in poetry, literature, wayfinding systems, landscape architecture, art, and a sense of self. A durable fashionability goes without

saying, as does the lasting power of oak wood, and its vexing qualities when worked with, especially where furniture-makers, arborists, and scientists attempting to extract useful tree-cores are concerned. Are trees and their enveloping landscapes “cultural objects”? Certainly Jared Farmer argues exactly that, in his recent book “Trees in Paradise,” all about California and its representative trees, which pointedly and dismissively fails to include oaks from species in any way emblematic of California and its human history (fig. 4).

Place names say otherwise: “oaks” are among our most common street names; ranches and features often have a Spanish take on oaks (encina or Encino, for instance, or “robles” or Thousand Oaks or Live Oak, or Oakland, for that matter). In the GNIS database are well over 1,000 place names sporting the word “oak.” Until 2009, the minor league baseball team for Visalia, California, was the “Oaks.” Art, too, is replete with oaks, and clearly, that aspect of California life—whether lavishing praise upon California as—so one booster put it—“a better Mediterranean,” presumably because English was spoken there (at least after a fashion), or because California was held to have immense value on its own merits (Starrs 1988, 11).

Pictorial art, whether in photography (think of the mid-nineteenth century city of Oakland photographs, or the Chaplin films) or in painting was much sought after. Pictorial art captures a critical era in California life and times while exotic species were arriving willy-nilly and changing the look and feel of Alta California. Through a crucial 100-year period from mid-1800s to mid-1900s, oaks were a prevalent landscape feature, and often included in works of art. The oak woodland was a staple of nineteenth and twentieth-century plein air artists, and is still. Work by California painters such as Granville Redmond (1871–1935), William Wendt (1865–1946), Maynard Dixon (1875–1946), Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993), Eyvind Earle (1916–2000), and Wayne Thiebaud (1920–present). And talented artist-ecologists such as Laura Cunningham, in *A State of Change: Forgotten Landscapes of California* (2010), reach even farther back into the historic past of landscape evolution.

At about mid-twentieth century, an aggressive spread of irrigated agriculture in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley and through the Coast Ranges began to disrupt what Spanish-Mexican culture and agriculture had not quite undone, removing oaks to permit cropping without the annoyance of mid-field trees (Starrs and Goin 2010). Nor were ambiguous utterances from range managers, who at time proposed removing oaks to spur grass production, particularly helpful. Oaks do not find machinery to be particularly good “friends,” so there is sufficient blame to spread around, in the saga of California oaks as landscape objects.

Oaks as working landscape

Which brings us to a modern and complicated pass: today and oaks. There is nothing wrong with a well-maintained oak woodland landscape, and, in fact, land and life in the lower Iberian Peninsula, in southeastern Portugal and Spain, and equally parts of France, Italy, Greece, and elsewhere, are home to an established and cherished low-intensity—but assuredly multi-product—agrosilvopastoral management system, the *dehesa* and *montado*, which have attracted no small attention. A so-called “permanent agriculture” of tree crops often centers on a mast of chestnuts, acorns, or other tree bounty that have, with human encouragement, fed livestock and wildlife at least since Roman times, and likely for centuries before that. The legacy and bounty is considerable, but did not transfer directly to California, and others will write of the contrast in systems, so on that theme I touch lightly for now.

The reality is, a “working landscape” attempts foremost to use resources already present, without making vast or irreversible alterations. So the lessons of Spain and Portugal are notable, especially in Visalia, where traditions from those lands were implanted and endured, perhaps even through today.

Oaks as imperative and scold

Before we grow too self-congratulatory, it bears noting that the work of the Integrated Hardwood Range Management Program (IHRMP) and of range managers and foresters at Berkeley, UC Davis, and from the scattered corners of California, have worked toward, but not prevented, a contemporary crisis in oak regeneration, management, and (Heaven forefend) proliferation. If mighty oaks from little acorns grow, they do not grow quickly or easily. In a state of 38 million residents, some with obscene amounts of cash, oaks are not safeguarded by public opinion (fig. 5).



Figure 5—Among the ironies of tree husbandry, urban forestry, land use planning, and historic preservation are the word games played to encourage investment and settlement. The “Live Oak Ranch” subdivision in Oakley, California, is named for a tree that was once prominent at that edge of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, but is far less often seen now, in no small measure because it is often removed before construction begins. (Photograph by Paul F. Starrs, 2006)

Subdivisions with names such as “Live Oak Ranch” predictably excised the live oaks, and obliterated any semblance of a working “ranch” some time ago, and the housing crash of 2008 took care of anything like replanting efforts—leaving a void of terraformed earth, neatly scraped clean to bare mineral soil by the same Caterpillars and other tracked vehicles invented by California’s geniuses of industrial agriculture, which were turned to other purposes: prepping places for people and pretentious

manse, dropped like Dorothy and Toto on what used to be a grassland dotted with rather elegant if dispersed oaks.

Planners, ranchers, researchers, stand around and regard a radically revised landscape, and promoters of heritage tree ordinances are left mouth agape in protest, with not much beyond little fines to be issued as a rejoinder and punishment for oak removal.

Oak woodlands as researchable features

On the theme of oaks and research, anyone curious about what's been done can consult the proceedings of the last six symposia—and, as a kind of culmination, this seventh symposium, which struck many attendees as offering a particularly effective summary and extension of recent work. For me to dwell at length on current trends in research and the practical advice being distributed to landowners and oak fanciers would reduplicate the bibliographies of later essays in this volume, and those will have the freshest material (fig. 6).



Figure 6—Researchers travel far and wide to survey the status of oaks, including no small amount of work abroad. (Photograph by Paul F. Starrs, 2012)

What deserves particular mention is that there is increasing attention in the literature on owners and managers of working oak woodlands studying the practices of other oak-rich regions, and, rather pointedly, learning from their successes and failures. A 500-some-page volume edited by Campos and others (2013) compares management, ecological issues, and ecosystem services derived from the woodlands of Spain and California, and follows on work originally presented at the 2001 fifth oak symposium in San Diego (Campos and others 2002). The 2013 book concludes with an observation weighing the value of comparative inquiry: “it pays to acknowledge how much can be learned from comparative research that matches physical, cultural, historical, economic, and geographical features, and then carefully

places likenesses and departures side-by-side, in a deliberate attempt to learn across oceans, landscapes, economies, and societies” (Starrs and others 2013, 493).

That argument for acknowledging and sustaining multiple-product landscapes and the people who inhabit them ties into a debate that weighs existence value at any cost against contrasting arguments that favor a utilitarian approach to the preservation of places and people. If there is a debate there (and even the most secular researcher can be stricken with an attack of honesty which suggests that maybe taking one side or another comes down to a matter of faith), then words from a recent op-ed column published in the New York Times seem especially apt: “So what should we do? Should we continue to invest in keeping ecosystems in historical configurations? Should we attempt to engineer landscapes to be resilient to tomorrow’s conditions? Or should we just let nature adapt on its own?” (Marris and Aplet 2014).

Those are questions that woodland managers and their scientific advisors will forever have in the back of their minds. That is precisely what good questions are for: nagging and, on occasion, producing answers both practical and practicable.

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