

## **Guardians of Landscape Memory: Ancient and Veteran Trees as Living Eco-Cultural Monuments**

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Veteran and heritage trees represent a unique intersection of the natural and human worlds, serving as profound anchors within cultural landscapes. Beyond their undeniable ecological significance and biodiversity value, these living organisms act as resilient vessels of collective memory, local identity, and socio-cultural continuity. This paper explores the multidimensional role of heritage trees through the framework of eco-cultural heritage and their contribution to sustaining the memory of place (genius loci). Utilizing a qualitative and historical approach, this study analyses heritage trees through their diverse socio-cultural contexts—ranging from folk legends, mythologies, and historic boundary markers to family-associated traditions and community meeting sites. Through selected case studies, we demonstrate how ancient trees bridge generations, anchor spatial memory across centuries, and function as living monuments to key historical events and local narratives. Furthermore, the paper addresses the current vulnerabilities these natural-cultural landmarks face, particularly the risk of losing the intangible heritage attached to them as oral histories fade. In conclusion, we emphasize the urgent need for an integrated conservation framework. Such a holistic strategy must seamlessly interweave botanical and biological management with the active safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, oral traditions, and community engagement to preserve the memory of place for future generations.

