

Seeing the Wood for the Trees

How does the love of books, and the West's love affair with paper,

affect the climate - and how can we reduce paper's footprint on campus and elsewhere?

Here in the English department, asking anyone why they study English will result in one answer above all: "Because I love books!" And, clearly, there is nothing wrong with that. Literature is a wellspring of creative thought, a mirror that reflects every aspect of humanity's woes, hopes, joys and fears. To study literature means to brush against history, religion, psychology; to read to delve into another human being's mind and explore places beyond our imagining. However, there is one element which remains problematic in light of the plight of the planet: that of the paper which gives us the narratives with which we have fallen in love. Our pastime, our study, has an inevitable cost to the planet: the cost of paper, and the trees that must pay for it.

In this year alone, 317, 893, 261 tons of paper have been produced globally, and at such a rate that since writing the past sentence, the above statistic is no longer accurate (Source: The World Counts). Paper production is costly: it requires time, land, and 10 litres of water for an A4 sheet. Logging in forests causes more problems. The cutting of trees releases carbon dioxide and the associated disruption can cause havoc to our local ecosystems, with animals that depend on trees struggling to survive without their main habitat. Ancient woodlands especially have dwindled: by 1900, only 5% of the UK was covered in 'green belt' land.

Trees also retain water in their roots; removal of these ancient storage systems can contribute to floods. This is where the plight of trees has a human cost. Flooding cost the UK government £2.2 billion in 2003 (Office of Science and Technology in the UK government, Flood and Coastal Defence, Foresight), and the cost has only gone up. This does not count the lives lost, nor the displacement of rural communities. As well as these cold facts and figures, the loss of woodland can affect our mental well-being. In 2018, a study by Song et al showed brief walks through the forest could help ease feelings of "fatigue", "depression" and "tension", along with other uncomfortable emotional states. There is a "significant correlation" between exposure to woods and psychological wellbeing. Without these trees, the mental health crisis would only worsen. Look at the Romantic poets – the emotions are the same.

The obvious answer is to go paperless. However, would this truly work for such a tactile department – and one, ironically, illiterate when it comes to computers? (Technology is not usually a strength for us tea-drinking, cardigan-clad scholars of literature, on the whole.) The experience of reading on a screen is very different to the paper counterpart. It requires a battery, sometimes an ungainly piece of equipment, a bright light shining into your eyes, and either buying a e-book again or hoping it is on the Internet somewhere. It is a vicious cycle – although paper is becoming increasingly hard to create ethically, the feel of paper under fingertips, the whispery rustle of the turning of the pages and the creak of a well-thumbed spine, and that smell of books is hard to turn away from. In addition, the importance of hard copies in our culture is still prevalent, and makes holding onto paper still essential.

So, what are the alternatives? Recycling certainly is one, and the amount of 'green bins' around our campus shows how seriously we take the idea of recycling. However, 55% of paper is still, regardless of recycling initiatives, coming from new trees (The World Counts). We must push forward more than ever, therefore, on this issue to keep the paper we have created in circulation, and thoroughly use as much as we can. Thin sheets of plastic paper would have been ideal twenty years ago. However, with what we know now, plastics that cannot biodegrade are purely putting off the inevitable. Making conscious decisions about where we buy our books from, however, is still viable. Buying books with wood approved by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) for instance, ensures that wood is truly sustainable. Meanwhile, second-hand bookshops not only allow us to help local charities, but also allows for circulation of additional notes from students past – which is always useful when understanding a difficult passage!

There is also another option, seen only in the pages of science fiction – that of Wells, Lem, Dick and Le Guin. We are already growing artificial meat products in laboratories by using only a sample of animal cells, and the rise in Vegan 'like-for-like' replacements with plant substitutes has opened up a world of possibilities. Would it be possible, in this altogether better *Brave New World*, to look to science for synthetic paper, grown from wood and bark cells and engineered in a lab?

Here at Royal Holloway, we are lucky to have such beautiful grounds and so many trees. We do well as a campus, and we can only hope that other universities do the same. It is so important, therefore, to help protect trees around the world – and ensure our welfare, too. What is often stressed is how important trees are to the planet, and indeed they are, as evidenced above.

However, the cold fact of the matter remains that the planet thrived long before trees set down their roots, and before Man's (and Woman's!) footprint pressed on the earth, and will thrive, in a different way, after both are gone. Earth is our home, but it was the dinosaurs' too. We are not protecting the animistic Mother Nature of Coleridge, or Thoreau's *Walden*, or Shakespeare's aerial spirits; we are protecting ourselves, and if the trees fail, so will we. Our children's children should read about trees, but see them out of the window, too.

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