

What Do Forests Symbolize?

In many parts of the world, forests represent much more than their physical presence. The following anecdotes describe ways that some people view forests in different areas of the world.

Cameroon

The Fang people of Cameroon perform their important rites and ceremonies at the foot of a forest tree, where they also grow plants for medicines. This tree symbolizes the forest, which houses the body of God. In their culture, the tree and forest medicines are believed to be vehicles through which people communicate with God.¹

Central African Republic

The Oubangui people in Central African Republic plant a tree for a newborn child, and the child's development throughout life is linked to the growth of the tree. If the tree stops growing, people fear for the health of the child, and they call on a healer. If the child gets sick, people bring it to the tree for treatment. When the tree begins to fruit, it is time for the child to marry. At death, the person's spirit goes to live in that special "birthright" tree.²

Côte d'Ivoire

There are sacred groves in Côte d'Ivoire where people teach moral values to their children, passing on the values from one generation to the next. The trees within those groves are viewed as sacred trees, housing spirits and providing links to ancestors. In some areas, those sacred groves are the only forested areas that remain.³

Finland

Many Finns see forests as places that offer shelter. As a symbol of that shelter, Finns decorate their doorways with birches. Even today, city-dwelling Finns take to the forests on weekends and holidays to escape from the urban stress.⁴



India

In south India, family members plant a coconut tree at the grave or cremation site of a person who has died. The tree represents the life force of the person. It is not watered or tended. It usually dries out and dies, which signifies that the deceased is progressing normally to becoming an ancestor.⁵

Japan

In Japan, many families have managed and used a particular forest for hundreds of years. Because of that relationship, many Japanese view forests as the continuity of life. Trees are seen as gifts from the ancestors, and some people plant trees as gifts for their grandchildren.⁶



New Zealand

The Maori people of New Zealand believe that they are descendants of the land and the forests and that each tree is like a human being with a life force and spirit of its own. They do not buy, sell, or own land, just as people do not buy, sell, or own other family members. They perform special ceremonies if they must remove a tree to construct a canoe or if they take anything else from the forest.⁷

Thailand

In Thailand, many people perceive forests as a source of danger. The Thai word for forest, paa, means wild or backward.⁸

United States

The Polynesian settlers of the Hawaiian Islands revered the upper reaches of the rainforest as the "uplands of the spirits," known as wao akua. People could not enter those sacred areas without special permission from the Gods.⁹



Sources

- 1 Falconer 1990.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Reunala 1999.
- 5 Rival 1998.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Forestry Insights 2007.
- 8 Mather 1990, 3.
- 9 State of Hawaii.