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Italian monumental trees and biodiversity: a focus on origin and landscape settings

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Abstract

The scientific community, policy-makers and citizens have increased the attention paid to monumental trees and their ecological, landscape and socio-cultural values. Monumental trees represent only a small portion of the population of trees, but require specific planning and management to maintain their notable and specific cultural and biodiversity values. These trees are generally identified for their exceptional size (e.g. trunk diameter, height), shape (e.g. crown and trunk shape), age, and/or for their intrinsic cultural values, having witnessed important historical events. Because of their specific structural and functional traits (e.g. tree-related microhabitats), monumental trees are essential for supporting complex and distinct assemblages of a wide range of species. However, little attention has been paid to the importance of monumental trees for biodiversity, especially in urban environments. In the project “MONIVERSITY – MONUmental and urban trees for biodiveRSITY: improving our knowledge on their origin and microhabitats”, we aimed to analyse and describe the monumental tree community of Italy, highlighting their importance for the conservation of biodiversity. We analysed the most updated version of the database of Italian monumental trees as identified according to the Italian Ministerial Decree 23/10/2014. Currently, it includes 4,006 monumental trees, both as single (ca. 90%) and groups of plants (ca. 10%). Over 90% of monumental trees were identified based on their age and/or size, followed by tree shape and habit, highlighting their importance in the Italian decision-making procedure in determining the monumentality of a tree. We coupled this with other databases reporting information on the origin (i.e. the national list of native and non-native flora) and spatial explicit variables. Knowledge of the composition and spatial distribution of monumental trees, distinguishing between native and non-native species, in urban and non-urban areas and cover types, allowed us to better understand their cultural value and their potential role in biodiversity. These results help propose management practices that aim to protect individual trees, their cultural significance, and their role for biodiversity, as well as the surrounding environment and the benefits to future generations.