VETree – training in the valuing and managing of veteran trees across Europe

Helen Read

A series of 9 freely accessible videos on managing veteran trees and a one-day course which is to be taught across Europe are among the achievements of a two-year European veteran tree project in which the Ancient Tree Forum has been a partner.
For the last two years the EU has funded the VETree project, through its ‘transfer of innovation’ scheme, to develop training materials on veteran tree management. Individual elements of these materials have been reported on previously in The ARB Magazine, but as this project draws to a close at the end of December the final items will be completed and everything will be available on the website.

The main focus of the project was to develop a one-day foundation course called ‘Valuing and managing veteran trees’ aimed at a very broad range of target groups, from arborists and others working on trees, to landowners and land managers who have responsibility for ancient and other veteran trees. This one-day course is being rolled out by training up people in different organisations to deliver it. Within the two years of the project, trial courses were held in five different countries in order to perfect the content and delivery mechanisms. All the material was checked by David Lonsdale, editor of Ancient and other veteran trees: further guidance on management, who acted as an external technical adviser to the project. Two of the pilot three-day ‘train the trainers’ courses were attended by AA members: Reg Harris reported on the first held in Spain in May 2014 (ARB Magazine 165, summer 2014, pages 32–36) and Simon Cox (AA Technical Officer) attended the course in the UK in September 2014 (see page 25).

Both the one-day foundation course and the three-day ‘train the trainers’ course have the aim of being interactive, requiring a high degree of delegate participation, and also include outdoor sessions.

Videos on the management of veteran trees

The teaching material includes a series of videos on the management of veteran trees. Some form part of the courses but all are downloadable for free from the VETree website. The titles are as follows:

- Techniques for crown reducing a veteran tree
- Halo clearance for veteran trees
- The importance of the land around a veteran tree
- Common sense risk management of veteran trees
- Creation of decaying wood habitats
- The management of veteran fruit trees
- The management of veteran pollards still in a regular cycle of cutting
- A lecture by David Lonsdale: ‘What to assess in trees before considering management options’
- A lecture by David Lonsdale: ‘Aging processes in trees, with special reference to beech and oak’

The website will also include additional information and details of a mentoring system to assist those who will be running the training courses.

Final event: international seminar in Sweden

The final event of the project was a seminar called ‘Securing the future for veteran trees across Europe’, held in Trollhättan, Sweden, approximately an hour north of Gothenburg, on 15 October. Attended by 80 people from eight different countries, the day included both indoor and outdoor elements. The project was introduced and described by Vikki Bengtsson of Pro Natura who also, just before lunch, treated the audience to ‘tree yoga’, an element of the training courses designed to reinforce the principles of aging in trees in a fun and memorable way. Speakers included Ted Green from the UK who spoke about the importance of veteran trees in Europe, and an address by Mircea Cazan, an MP from the Romanian Parliament, which was followed by a presentation about Romanian veteran trees and wood pastures by Luminita Holban.

As host country, Sweden was well represented, but the range of talks indicated the breadth of projects on veteran trees being carried out in the country at the moment. These included a cultural evaluation by Håkan Slotte of the Swedish Environment Protection Agency (equivalent of English Heritage), a presentation on protection by Hasse Berglund of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (equivalent to Natural England) and one on management by Claes Svendlindh from the County Administrative Board of Östergötland, the county in Sweden that includes the famous oak district. The final Swedish presentation was a joint one by Linda Ternström and Jörgen Olsson who demonstrated the range of activities that have been undertaken by the LONA project, which aims to increase awareness of veteran trees among the public and politicians in 16 different districts within the two counties in Sweden. Arborists were represented by Tomislav Vitkovic from the European Arboricultural Council who gave some personal reflections on some veteran trees from his home country of Croatia as well as speaking about some of the techniques available that can be applied to the management of veteran trees.

The indoor part was rounded off by Jill Butler from the Woodland Trust who reviewed responses from all participants to two questions relating to the threats to veteran trees and potential solutions. The main threats identified included a lack of knowledge of veteran tree populations in many countries, recognition of their value at EU level, disproportionate fears about risks to the public from old trees which will hopefully be addressed by the VETree video on this subject, and a lack of future generations of veteran trees. There was general agreement that solutions include the need to develop more training, and to raise awareness and skills amongst both the professional sector and the general public. It was also acknowledged that solutions to lack of protection and lack of grants for management are challenging to find, and that continuation of the lobbying of EU and national governments for changes in legislation is still required. Jill went on to say, ‘It has been wonderful to hear from the speakers about all the exemplar activity in Sweden and other countries and I know the products created by the VETree project will inspire us and others to secure a future for veteran trees’.

Filming for VETree videos in Sweden.
Ancient Tree Forum news

Spring field visit to Bradgate Park
The Ancient Tree Forum’s annual spring field event will be held on Thursday 12 March 2015 at Bradgate Park in Leicestershire (pictured below), a site which was first enclosed as a deer park 800 years ago, and is home to a great many ancient and veteran trees. The event is free, and everyone is welcome, but it is essential to book. To request a booking form, email eventsATF@aol.com.

Chalara and the threat to ancient and veteran ash
A working group of experts from the Ancient Tree Forum has produced a statement on Chalara to raise awareness of ash dieback and its potential effect on ancient and veteran trees, and inform decision-makers about the issues. Topics explored in the statement include controlling the importation of alien pests and pathogens, learning from overseas knowledge and expertise, arboriculture and tree management, and government and local authority responsibilities. To view the statement, go to www.ancient-tree-forum.org.uk.

Keep in touch with the Ancient Tree Forum
A free digital newsletter is produced by the Ancient Tree Forum, with information about forthcoming events and news of interest to those who manage, own or simply enjoy ancient and veteran trees. If you would like to be added to the mailing list, email enquiries@ancienttreeforum.co.uk. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

Ancient tree handbook
Ancient and other veteran trees: further guidance on management, edited by David Lonsdale of the Ancient Tree Forum, is widely considered as a ‘must read’ for tree owners, managers, arborists and advisers. Illustrated with photographs and diagrams, the book considers topics including the survey and evaluation of veteran trees, assessing the tree work requirements, and the need for holistic and landscape-scale management of ancient and veteran trees. Copies can be obtained from the Tree Council at www.treecouncil.org.uk.

for the benefit of many generations of Europeans to come.’

Following the talks a short bus journey took participants to Våstra Tunhem, a lovely wood pasture with oaks, just a short distance from the conference venue. The trees themselves then became the stars for the outdoor session, and despite the very heavy rain, everyone was impressed by the wonderful old trees. Delegates were divided into four groups, each of which visited a different tree in turn to hear short presentations about fungi and decay (Ted Green and Jill Butler), the body language of trees (Jon Hartill), pruning veteran trees (Vikki Bengtsson and Helen Read) and the management of the site (Hans Alexandersson).

Back at the Scandic Swania Hotel in Trollhättan and a little drier and warmer we were all treated to a wonderful Swedish smörgåsbord with a wide range of fish and meat and then an after dinner talk by Urban Emanuelsson. Introduced by organiser Vikki Bengtsson as ‘Sweden’s Oliver Rackham’, Urban described some elements of his book The Rural Landscapes of Europe, with particular emphasis on veteran trees and wood pastures.

VETree partners and organisations
The VETree partners are Pro Natura (Sweden), Inverde (Belgium), Amigos de los Árboles Viejos (Spain), Progresul Silvic (Romania) and the Ancient Tree Forum (UK). All of these organisations will continue to run courses, implement the mentoring system and maintain the website after the end of the project. The transfer of innovation grants are intended to spread best practice from a country or countries that have experience of a particular subject to those that are less experienced. For this project the most experienced countries were the UK and Sweden, although it is recognised that all countries have aspects which they can contribute. The training courses and videos were devised and prepared by Vikki Bengtsson (Sweden) and Helen Read (ATF).

Where to get more information
The videos are all available on the VETree website for free download in English. The other language versions (Basque, Flemish, Romanian, Spanish and Swedish) will be uploaded as they are completed, before the end of December. Additional e-learning material and fact sheets will also be uploaded as they are available in each language. One-day and three-day courses will be held by the Ancient Tree Forum (as well as the other partner organisations in their own countries) and these will be listed on the VETree website as well as the ATF website. Organisations whose members have attended the three-day course may also be running the foundation courses themselves (including the AA: see page 24 for more information).

The ATF is maintaining a mailing list of people interested in attending courses. Please contact Helen Read (helen.read@ancienttreeforum.co.uk) to be put on the list for further information and dates.

VETree website: www.vetree.eu
You can also follow the VETree project on Facebook and Twitter.