



Urban tree survey: Letter from a Museum botanist



Bob Press is a botanist working at the Natural History Museum in London. Botanists are scientists who study plants, and Bob's specialist area is trees. He has written a letter to school students who want to help with the urban tree survey. Read it together and discuss any questions you have with your teacher and classmates.

Comprehension questions

1. What does a botanist study?
2. What is Bob Press's special area of study?
3. What is a survey?
4. Why does Bob Press want to find out more about the tree population of the UK?
5. Why does he need our help?
6. Why have the populations of some tree species decreased in the UK?
7. Why are trees an important part of an ecosystem?
8. Why do scientists give living things scientific names?



15 May 2010

Dear Students

Urban Trees Survey

The Natural History Museum has launched an important national survey of trees in parks, streets and gardens in the UK. Trees in these kinds of places have never been fully surveyed.

We can't get to all these places ourselves and we would like you to help us carry out the survey. We are asking you to look at the trees near you and tell us what you find by uploading the results to our website. Then everyone else, including scientists interested in tree populations, will be able to see the results of the survey using our interactive map.

Why do scientists survey?

A botanical survey is a count of different kinds of plants in a particular area. Botanists run surveys so they can find out how plant populations change through time. Populations of some native UK species have decreased because they were cut down for their wood, or to make way for farms and buildings. Many other tree species have been introduced into the UK from overseas.

If we have more information about the populations of different tree species we can better understand the UK's biodiversity – the variety of living things – and the changes that affect it. This is important because trees are an important part of the ecosystem. They provide homes (habitats) for birds, insects and animals. They also enhance our quality of life because they are beautiful to look at, and they improve air quality on busy city streets.

Botanists like me group plants into different species. Each species has a scientific name made up of two latin words eg *Quercus robur* (common name: English Oak). The first part of the scientific name tells you the genus that the species belongs to and the second part tells you the particular species it is. A genus is a group of species that share certain features such as leaf shape, so the latin name can help you to predict what a species will be like, even if you've never seen it before.

Scientific names also ensure that we always know exactly what plant we are talking about. It's like your name - you have a first name and a surname. If you didn't, someone would have to describe you in detail every time they wanted to talk about you. Having a name makes it much faster and easier for people to know who we are talking about. When you go out and survey you will use the leaf chart to identify the leaves you find. Then record the species or group name of the tree on the special recording sheet that your teacher will give you.

If you find a tree that is not on the chart, your teacher should be able to help you find out what species or group it belongs to using websites or books.

Most importantly, enjoy the survey. The variety and beauty of nature is all around us – we just have to look for it.

I look forward to seeing your survey results.

Bob Press

Botanist