The environmental impacts of the Russia–Ukraine war: Reflections from the setting of an English botanic garden

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The scene is a beautiful botanic garden, a peaceful oasis within a large and crowded city in England. I come here as often as I can, especially during spring and summer. I come to observe, to listen, to reflect. I am here, but also somewhere else. In Ukraine. I have never visited the country, but my research on the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war – and specifically its environmental impacts – is never far from my thoughts.

Tree stories

In the garden, I lend the trees my ears and try to shut out everything else around me. I focus on their many voices, whisperings and susurrations. One or two start and the others follow, like a well-rehearsed orchestra. The wind conducts them skilfully.

My eyes are drawn to a silent tree by itself. Short stumps are all that remain of its former limbs. In the past, I would probably have just walked straight past it. Not now. I wonder what happened to it. What is your story?

Off one of the pathways, I notice a wooden head stone on the ground. It reads "MEMORIAL TO AN ENGLISH OAK". I am curious to know what happened to this oak, just as I want to know more about the tree with the stumps. What are their stories?

Robert Frost's *A Witness Tree* (1942) includes a poem called *Beech* and the lines:

One tree, by being deeply wounded,
Has been impressed as Witness Tree.

Trees as witnesses; witness trees. How many of these trees are there in the world? What have they 'seen' and experienced? If they were people, they would be referred to as 'victim-witnesses'. Indigenous writer and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013: 168) explains that "[i]n our Anishinaabe way, we count trees as people, 'the standing people'".

Trees as people. A tree wearing a gas mask. Skinny and damaged, it doesn't look much like a tree anymore. The tree is next to a road in Kreminna, in eastern Ukraine (Dyer, 2024). The tree wears a khaki green gas mask, the breathing tube dangling like an elephant's trunk. Is it still there today, I wonder? Who put the gas mask on it and why? Were they making the point that trees also suffer the effects of war? Were they acknowledging the tree itself as a witness? I wonder what name Donna Haraway might give this strange creature of bark, rubber and plastic. Perhaps a type of holobiont (Haraway, 2016: 60), an assemblage that represents and reflects the entanglements of different lifeworlds in war – and the stories that arise from these entanglements.

Trees as witnesses. Trees as victims. The acrid smell of smoke continues to linger in the cold Ukrainian air. Smouldering, blackened barks stand in the place of once verdant forests (DW, 2025). How many lives have been lost? How many more-than-human worlds have been harmed or destroyed?

A biologist in Kharkiv, in northeastern Ukraine, is seeking to restore destroyed forest by planting English oak trees (Harding, 2024). I think back to the wooden head stone with the words "MEMORIAL TO AN ENGLISH OAK". Will there be memorials to the trees harmed and destroyed by the Russia–Ukraine war?

Encounters

For a few brief seconds, I hear nothing except the trees whispering together. A squirrel suddenly scampers across the grass a few metres away from me. It stands on its back legs and appears to look at me intently. Just as suddenly, it scurries off into a bush. I wonder what the garden is like once everyone has left. If I were the only human animal here, how might it open out, concertina-like, to new sights and sounds?

I find a spot near some violet *Agastache* Blue Boa, the tubular flowers shaped like dainty over-turned cups. I watch several bees as they busily fly in and out, consuming the rich nectar and collecting pollen. Some bee species use vibrations, or sonications, to extract pollen. This 'buzz pollination' captures and reflects a deep and ancient synergy between bees and flowers.

I momentarily hear a buzz near my right ear. Bzzzzzz. Now the sound is coming from overhead, loud and persistent. I am running from it, but it continues to pursue me. Panting, I take cover in a nearby bush and wait. Drones, large numbers of them, hover and loiter above Ukraine's forests, cities and frontline areas with deadly effects. Bzzzzzz. I see the squirrel again. We

look at each other through the undergrowth. I wonder what the buzzing sounds like to him/her.

Acoustic trauma

Close to where I am sitting, a young woman relaxes on the grass with a group of her friends. Her shimmering blue skirt reminds me of a mermaid's tail, swishing from side to side in the breeze.

I think of a Ukrainian marine biologist whom I interviewed. She shared with me a recording of the Black Sea that she had made in 2021 while doing research on Dzharylhach Island. The gentle and rhythmical lapping of the waves is comforting (https://is.gd/MGBblE). "Listen to the surf", Beston (2019: 40) writes, "really lend it your ears, and you will hear in it a world of sounds".

This world of sounds fundamentally changed one year later. Explosions. Sea mines. Naval sonar. During the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, large numbers of dead dolphins began to wash up on the Black Sea coast (Węgrzyn *et al.*, 2023). They were just some of the many other-than-human victims of a war that has deeply interfered with the sonic components of ecosystems – and with how "plants and animals interact with each other and with their surroundings" (Mullet *et al.*, 2016: 2).

Resilience

The garden is a different place now. There is a thin layer of frost on the ground and a bitter wind is blowing.

The surface of Ukraine's Dnipro River has frozen over. Some local men are drilling holes into the ice, trying to catch fish (BBC, 2026). Fishing offers them a brief respite from the four-year war. Is there any respite for the animals too? Perhaps for some. There is currently a hunting ban in place, for example. Probably some of the animals have also adapted, at least to some extent, to the shocks and stressors of the war.

I hear the cawing of a rook flying overhead. I hear the sound of rooks in a park in Dnipro in central Ukraine, recorded by one of the interviewees – a bird watcher (https://is.gd/Um2zbb). I hear the sound of Nature's resilience.

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