Introduction

The term “culturally modified trees”, CMTs, has been coined to describe cut marks, carvings and inscriptions on trees and originating from a traditional use of a wood or forest. The marks or carvings were either created during direct extraction of bark or wood, or as symbols and landmarks in a traditional landscape. This is a largely unknown and unrecognised aspect of some ancient forested landscapes. However, recent research is helping to raise awareness and set in place positive conservation and protection. One of the great remaining CMT archives is the boreal Scandinavian forests where there are thousands of CMTs preserved. These are mainly from the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century but dating back to the fifteenth century. This article introduces two types of CMTs in Sweden; marks from bark extraction and carvings in a landscape of livestock herding.

Bark peeling scars

The Sami people of northern Sweden had a tradition of peeling and preparing Scots Pine inner bark for various purposes, and this is described in written sources dating back to the eighteenth century. This article introduces two types of CMTs in Sweden; marks from bark extraction and carvings in a landscape of livestock herding.

CMTs, or culturally modified trees, are markings on trees made by people for various purposes. These markings are often the result of traditional practices and can provide valuable insights into the history and culture of the area where they are found. One of the most common types of CMTs is bark peeling scars, which are created by stripping the inner bark from a tree in order to extract it for use in various ways. This type of CMT is often found in areas with a long history of human activity, and can provide important information about the local environment and the people who used it.

Tree carvings

Closely related to traditional livestock herding, it was customary to carve text and symbols on Scots Pine trees and use them as ‘notice boards’ or ‘signs’ in the landscape. To create these carvings a small axe always carried around by the herder was used. First of all bark from part of the trunk was removed and the wood surface was smoothed. Then notches in the form of letters or signs were cut into the wood. To be able to do finer notches a knife could also be used, using the axe to hammer on the back of it. The carved trees marked daily routes to suitable grazing areas and were probably also important as demarcations between different herding groups. The inscriptions included names, years, length of stay, end of stay, evaluation of grazing conditions and sometimes whole sentences, such as ‘We have lost three cows!’. Tree carvings are now preserved in some managed forest landscapes generally alongside streams and close to, sometimes on, wetlands.

Culturally Modified Trees or Working Trees – so what’s the difference?

A parallel to CMTs is the term promoted by Ted Green and Ian Rotherham of ‘Working Trees’ or ‘Worked Trees’. The term working trees refers to those that have been managed to more efficiently generate wood, tree fodder, bark, material for charcoal making, firewood or building materials. This seems similar in some ways to CMTs. However, whilst CMTs were never actually managed but only to a degree slightly ‘harvested’ or ‘marked’ as they were growing wild in the woods, working trees were often totally reshaped to maximize generation of a valuable product. This was possible in broadleaved woodlands, with tree species that could stand partial or total branch removal (as in pollarding), or willing to send up new shoots or suckers after the main stem had been cut (as in coppicing).

So, the answer to the question whether ‘Working Trees’ and CMTs are the same must be both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Working trees are culturally modified, only more; it is a matter of degree.
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Culturally modified trees in Sweden

The future
Marked trees have been found in North America, northern Europe and elsewhere. It is now hoped to address other forms of culturally marked trees across parts of Great Britain, including ancient graffiti and other carvings. If you are interested then do contact World of Trees Magazine to find out more about the project.

Some suggested background reading:


All photos examples of bark striped and culturally marked trees from Northern Sweden ©Rikard Andersson