

The Value of Trees

From our primate ancestors, who evolved from life in the treetops, to young environmentalists planting saplings today, trees and humans share a long history. The term “tree hugger” originates from the 1700s when a sect of Hindus called Bishnois combatted Indian elites’ demands for lumber. The group, whose members value mercy and environmental protection,¹ wrapped their arms around their region’s trees, preventing construction teams from chopping them down.²

It’s no wonder why Bishnois value trees: the plant provides humans with innumerable benefits. Some ecologists label the human-tree dynamic as commensalistic—a type of symbiotic relationship where one party gains something from the other without causing harm or benefit in return.³ For instance, trees offer food, shelter and oxygen, while humans provide nothing equivalent to the tree. Even so, the label isn’t always true. Conservationists protect these organisms, while loggers make a living from killing them.

Understanding the benefits trees yield and possessing the patience to grow them, however, are entirely different. A recent New York Times article, “The Latest Wealth Flex: Big Trees,” describes how corporate executives are paying upwards of \$500,000 to uproot, transport, and replant massive oaks to decorate their office lawns.⁴ In an age of instant gratification, these

¹ Pankaj Jain, “Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability,” rev. Noel Salmond. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 3 (2012): 828–30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23263618>.

² Ezra Rashkow, “Resistance to Hunting in Pre-Independence India: Religious Environmentalism, Ecological Nationalism or Cultural Conservation?” *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 2 (2015): 270–301. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24495403>.

³ Kaitlyn A. Mathis and Judith L. Bronstein, “Our Current Understanding of Commensalism.” *Annual Review of Ecology, Evolution, and Systematics*, vol. 51 (2020): 167–89. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48595916>.

⁴ Guy Trebay, “The Latest Wealth Flex: Big Trees,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/05/style/the-latest-wealth-flex-big-trees.html?smid=url-share>

billionaires aren't paying for trees, but rather time. Yet, no amount of money can nurture new life.

The Dickinson College campus has a history of growing trees the slow way and of giving its plants new life through creative means. The Trout Gallery's exhibit, *BRANCH: Trees in American Art*, exemplifies this. Among its artifacts is "Denny and Parker Properties," a photograph depicting an on-campus tree that shaded George Washington.⁵ In 1950, sculptor Mary O. Abbott carved the remaining trunk into a ceremonial staff to lead Dickinson's convocation and commencement processions. Combining historical and modern tree material, the staff blends Dickinson's Revolutionary history with its present, revitalizing values.

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⁵ Trout Gallery Informational Plaque on *Denny and Parker Properties*, 1875.