

---

Opinion

## **GUEST COLUMN: Save Harvard's supercentenarian oak from the ax**

**By Dr. Reese Halter and Professor Gretchen Legler**

Posted Mar 19, 2019 at 10:07 AM

Updated Mar 19, 2019 at 10:07 AM

Amidst all the madness of today's world, it is difficult to fathom that America's oldest university, Harvard, would contemplate felling a robust supercentenarian red oak. Is this the price of progress?

Ancient urban trees are a sign of wealth and well being. The ancient ones are invaluable CO2 warehouses. As these cherished cathedrals age, they inhale more CO2 and exhale more oxygen. Earth's atmospheric oxygen, as measured by Scripps O2 program, is plummeting from burning subsidized fossil fuels. Every ancient living tree is a priceless oxygen generator, and as a part of an urban forest regulating local, regional and continental climates.

Healthy mature urban trees are vital for absorbing rising combustion pollution and ameliorating ever increasing storm water runoff. They also provide crucial habitat for urban wildlife including the birds and the bees. Moreover, those large trees cast priceless shade, especially during the summertime, helping to cool buildings between 20 and 40 percent. Collectively, urban tree canopies help keep our cities and towns habitable, lowering dark-surfaced urban heat islands by as much as 9 degrees.

We must protect all ancient trees in America. Elevated temperatures, with more frequent, intense, longer lasting heatwaves and droughts are killing millions of urban trees. The United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service reported that from 2009-14, 180 million urban trees perished. That's an area equivalent to 175,000 acres. Unprecedented.

Make no mistake in believing that reforestation is the answer. It takes urban saplings many decades to offer any of the ecological and physiological services of living mature urban trees. This much we do know. In areas that lack mature

trees, elevated urban noise pollution retards children's cognition by up to 18 months. Also, mental health issues including depression and suicide, as well as crime rates, spike.

In the face of rising CO2 emissions with supercharged fossil fuel oceanic heat that drives Earth's climate, maintaining every ancient healthy tree is of paramount importance.

There's a vibrant supercentenarian oak guarding the Andover Hall courtyard of the Harvard Divinity School. Students, alumni, faculty, visiting academics and dignitaries often stop to admire this ancient one and seek a moment of solace. This massive thriving masterpiece is truly spellbinding!

The Divinity School received \$65 million in donations to makeover and expand Andover Hall. Instead of opting to develop the nearby open field, the planning committee decided upon sealing in the courtyard. That means the glorious ancient oak, which when leafed freely exhales powerful airborne medicines that fight infections and cancers to all those that inhale its oxygen, is slated to be axed.

The students, Cambridge residents and some of the faculty are up in arms. They love that magnificent breathing basilica and it loves them back with oxygen, medicines, habitat for the animals and sought after summertime shade.

Currently, there are no laws in Cambridge to protect this beauty from a hideous chainsaw massacre.

Harvard's Board of Overseers values the ecosystem services of nature, and in particular, the ancient trees on its campus. The senseless destruction of the Harvard School of Divinity's ancient red oak will indeed garner much worldwide negative press.

What makes this current choice even more ironic is Harvard Divinity School's role in fostering a defiant nature-loving radical theology via American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous 1838 Divinity School Address. The transcendentalist theologian and Unitarian Universalist minister criticized the "defects" in historical Christianity, calling for a return to an "original relation to the universe," a religion that could behold God and nature as one.

Emerson's words heavily influenced another iconic American nature-lover, Henry David Thoreau, a member of Harvard College's graduating class of 1837, to whom Emerson gave an address the year before. In what later became known as "The American Scholar," Emerson urgently encouraged the young scholars to break away from, to cut ties with old-fashioned, worn out worldviews and forge a new creative American cultural spirit.

Thoreau and his mentor became giants of American letters and philosophy, shapers of American religious history and forerunners of modern American environmentalism. May the spirit of Emerson and the spirit of Thoreau embolden us now, at this time of environmental and spiritual crisis in American life, too, as Thoreau wrote in his essay "Walking," "speak a word for Nature... for there are enough champions of civilization."

There's a lot of room for compromise from the leadership at the Divinity School as well as the Board of Overseers. This compromise is what constitutes sustainable progress. Harvard is a renowned free-thinking institution known to have a "heart of oak." Ethically, Harvard embraces solutions including those that spare wonderful healthy life-sustaining ancient trees.

*Dr. Reese Halter is an ecological stress tree physiologist and author of "Love! Nature."  
Gretchen Legler is a writer, professor at the University of Maine Farmington and second-year master's student at the Harvard Divinity School.*