

## Introduction to the Special Section TAXUS

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The European yew (*Taxus baccata* L.) is a symbolic tree of great ecological, cultural and therapeutic value. The yew and its habitat are threatened in Europe due to a wide array of factors, including climate and land-use changes, forest fires, and livestock pressure. For these reasons, yew groves are a priority habitat for conservation in the European Union, classified as Habitat 9580\*.

Especially in the context of global change for a region as vulnerable as the Mediterranean, it is essential to propose effective conservation measures both for the yew tree and its habitat. In addition, the uniqueness of the yew groves permits them to be used as a tool for effectively communicating the value of biodiversity and its preservation. This is the essence and motivation of the LIFE TAXUS project ([www.taxus.cat](http://www.taxus.cat)) which aims to contribute to the conservation of the yew habitat in Catalonia as an umbrella for the protection and promotion of the natural and cultural heritage of the Mediterranean.

The first "International workshop on yews and yew Forests in the western Mediterranean" was held during the early summer of 2006 in the Font Roja Natural Park in Alcoi (Alacant) under the auspices of the LIFE project "Managing and Adding Value to Three High Mountain Habitats", organized by the Environmental Department of València. It provided the framework from which the "Spanish Friends of the Yew and its Associated Ecosystems" (*Amigos del Tejo y las Tejedas*) would emerge six months later. From the very beginning, this group has concentrated their efforts in finding more profound and in depth knowledge of all aspects relating to this emblematic tree and its habitat. The steady and broad exploration of the yew has become the identity of the Association; including anything from human and cultural lore to its biology and ecology. In cooperation with universities and other teaching institutions, ongoing ecological and population studies are being conducted in different geographical areas. These various entities contribute their own data or compilation of specific references. Combined efforts are aimed at acquiring knowledge and preserving this unique species as isolated individuals or entire forests, whilst making an effort to include their immediate social and cultural environs as well as their ecological and environmental contexts.

Periodic gatherings of experts who specialize in different topics related to the yew have since been organized by the Garrotxa branch of the Catalan Institution

of Natural History. One such gathering was held in Olot in 2008, and another was put on by the *Asociación A Morteira*, the Ponferrada City Council, and the University of León in Ponferrada in 2010. Four years later, on 23-25 October 2014, we celebrated the "IV International Yew Conference" at the Monastery of Poblet (Catalonia). This conference was financed by the LIFE TAXUS project as one of its main dissemination activities, and was organized by the Forest Sciences Centre of Catalonia (CTFC), the Poblet Natural Site of National Interest, and by the Government of Catalonia, with the collaboration of the *Consorti de la Serra de Llaberia*, the *Ajuntament de Rasquera*, the *Consorti de l'Alta Garrotxa*, the *Departament d'Agricultura, Ramaderia, Pesca Alimentació i Medi Natural* of the Catalan Government and the association *Amigos del Tejo*.

The IV International Yew Conference represents the culmination of an ambitious project which transcends the geographical boundaries of the western Mediterranean region and the European yew, the focus of previous gatherings, to encompass the global distribution of the *Taxus* genus. The papers, communications, and posters presented by speakers from Asia, Africa, North America and Europe presented in this Conference address a substantial portion of worldwide *Taxus* species (*T. baccata*, *T. globosa*, *T. canadensis*, *T. floridana*, *T. chinensis*, *T. fuana*, *T. wallichiana*) and the issues surrounding their existence. Ecological, genetic, phytosociological, morphometric, dendrochronological, demographic, reproductive, anthropological and cultural aspects, as well as the medicinal and active principle production concerns were addressed in depth during this workshop. Based upon the LIFE TAXUS aims, the scope of the workshop also allowed for in depth discussions of management practices that, while covered to different extents in past conferences, reached unprecedented levels of diversity and detail during this edition. Our thanks and acknowledgement goes out to all the people who made this gathering possible almost exclusively through their full time personal effort, for their unstinting dedication to bringing this Conference to fruition, and especially to those who travelled long distances to share their knowledge and friendship with us.

This special section in the Forest Systems Journal is only a sample of the research presented in the IV International Conference; however, we do hope that it accurately represents the bigger picture of the event.

We'd like to thank *Forest Systems* for giving us the wonderful opportunity to make this edition possible. We hope this exchange of experiences, the gathering of experts, and the compilation of visions and knowledge contained in this volume will manifest as a respect

for these trees, the forests where they live, the cultures that admire them and the places where they have been worshipped since ancient times.

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