

**An early experience of environmental education: The Tree Festival [Fiesta del Árbol]  
in Spain at the beginning of the 20th century**

**FRANCISCO MARTÍN ZÚÑIGA**

**UNIVERSIDAD DE MÁLAGA**

It would appear that the world's first Tree Festival was held in Spain around 1805. The event took place in the village of Villanueva de la Sierra (Cáceres) in the Extremadura region on the initiative of its parish priest, Ramón Vacas Rojo. This festival and the study of its origins resurfaced in the early 1980s thanks to work of local teachers and in December 2016 it was declared to be Asset of Intangible Cultural Interest [Bien de Interés Cultural inmaterial] by the state.

The first fully documented Tree Festival was held in Madrid in 1896, organized by the City Council and the Provincial Council [Diputación]. More than 12,000 people participated and a great deal of effort went into it. However, the final result was an excessively institutional and expensive event and it was not repeated. Subsequently, on April 30, 1899, the first Tree Festival was held in Barcelona Park, organized by the Friends of the Tree Festival Society [Sociedad Amigos de la Fiesta del Árbol], founded by the forest engineer Rafael Puig i Valls, and it served as a model for the subsequent festivals.

Given the interest shown in them, they were officially established at a national level in a Royal Decree dated March, 11 1904. In the first article of the decree it was specified that their purpose was twofold, one was educational and the other reforestation through "...the planting of trees in an area of public forest or in a suitable place nearby, the developing of linear plantations along roads and watercourses ...". They were to be organized through local boards made up of the forest engineers of the forest districts, the mayor, the doctor, the parish priest, the highest-ranking school teacher and the foremost contributor. Finally, in another Royal Decree, of January 5, 1915 "The annual celebration of a Tree Festival is declared obligatory in each municipal district. The date on which it is to be held will be fixed by the corresponding

corporations in ordinary session and the decision will be made public for all the inhabitants of the municipality". Associations as well as public and private entities of the locality, including schools, were to be invited to this event.

The aim of this study is to examine the development of this festival from the aforementioned decree onward, highlighting how nature was promoted as an educational space for the first time at the institutional level, although the hypothesis advanced is that they were excessively formal activities with little concern for the education of children.

More specifically, the focus of the study is on the experiences of certain municipalities in the region of Andalusia (Málaga, Córdoba, and Jaén) as they are among the least researched to date, based on the analysis of documentary sources such as municipal minutes and annual reports and the abundant graphic material published in the local press.

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