In pictures | Tbilisi's dying evergreens

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(Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)

As the trees on Tbilisi's periphery have began to turn orange and die, struck by parasites and bark fungi spreading throughout the city, Tbilisi City Hall has begun a massive tree cutting and treatment programme. But environmental activists say there is more that can be done to save Tbilisi's last green areas.

During the Soviet period, pine trees were planted en masse throughout Tbilisi to protect the city from mudslides and floods caused by logging in the 19th century. The communist authorities performed large-scale work, sometimes even exploding rocks where necessary to clear more space for the evergreens. Black pines and cedarwoods proved to be the most resilient, providing shade for leafier trees to grow under their protection.



One of the affected species is the cedarwood tree. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)



The disease starts from the lower branches, then goes up along the bark, before finally drying out the crown. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)



Once green neighbourhoods are now turning orange. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)

While the trees succeeded in protecting the city from mudslides, the choice of species has created problems in the long-run.

According to Irakli Macharashvili, from environmental organisation the Green Alternative, the choice of species was a bad one: 'The black pine is not a native species, which would naturally grow better.'

Another mistake, he says, was planting the pines too close together; the pines may have saved the city from mudslides, but they failed to provide space for new trees that would eventually substitute them. 'For years, mandatory logging hasn't been performed, and the trees that were already weak became vulnerable to pests', Macharashvili tells *OC Media*.

In addition, experts say that during the last five years, a change in climate has taken a toll. According to Macharashvili, rainy springs and extremely dry summers have created the perfect conditions for fungi, and tree-eating bugs have contributed to the rest of the trees' decline.



One of the key problems is the pines' proximity to each other. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)



Tree-eating pests weaken the trunk from within. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)

'Nearly every pine tree you'll encounter is sick', says Nata Peradze, the leader of environmental activist group Guerrilla Gardening Tbilisi.

According to her, the city's green spaces are still not being treated enough with pesticides.

'A lot of times, cut trees are just left there to rot and the parasites move on to their next home from the logs. These logs should instead be carried away and burned', Peradze tells *OC Media*.

According to her, the authorities need to be proactive in seeking out diseased trees, not waiting for them to die. 'If a tree is very ill, it must be logged before the disease spreads', Peradze says. 'The logging period is also crucial because the pest must be sleeping during the process'.

According to her, the Municipal Department of Environmental Protection has been trained in proper logging management, but there has not been sufficient follow-up.



Activists insist the sanitary measures being taken are insufficient and are allowing the illnesses to spread. Benches made of diseased logs near Lisi Lake allow pests to spread to neighbouring trees easily. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)



Unless the fallen pines are taken away, pests can find new hosts in the surrounding trees. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)



'The global tendency is to replace pines with foliar trees [...] Pines are more flammable and are a more serious fire-hazard' says Irakli Macharashvili. This can lead to occurrences such as forest fires near Lisi Lake. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)



The dead trees will be given as firewood to socially vulnerable members of society by the municipality, according to the Municipal Department of Environmental Protection. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)

The municipality begins spraying pesticides in March and finishes in November. Guerilla Gardening Tbilisi has demanded more details about their schedule numerous times, but have always been denied.

According to Peradze, an infected tree can still be cured if the disease is still at an early stage.

'We did our own spraying independently. It's quite cheap — ₾5 ($2) is enough for about 15 trees. We took samples to an expert and decided which medication to use. Ana Gabriadze [one of the activists] managed to save several trees in Dighomi Park that were in the early stages, while Marika Makharashvili [another activist] successfully cured some trees in Vera. This year, we're thinking of starting preventive spraying.'



Due to sanitary cuts, a park on Tsereteli Street had to be closed. The trunks were left to serve as decoration; the park administration plans to grow ivy on them. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)



One of the most diseased areas can be found in Dighomi. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)



Tbilisi City Hall plans to restore the logged areas. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)

The cut trees are replaced with pine saplings or one of 50 species selected by the City Hall in collaboration with a panel of experts and green activists. However, it will be years before the city recovers from the damage created by the lost trees.

'We're grateful to Tbilisi City Hall for cooperating with us and selecting these species, which are really good quality too', Peradze says. 'However, we are also seeing a lot of decorative bushes and plants that were not on that list, and fewer trees.'

According to Peradze, not only the evergreens are being affected; within five years, residents of Tbilisi will witness the rapid decline of trees with foliage, she warns.

'The pine-tree diseases come from the east, while foliar tree illnesses come from the west. We have a clash of epidemics here and it will be hard to keep them under control. It's not only the capital's problem but a nationwide issue', she tells *OC Media*.

Guerilla Gardening Tbilisi say they tried in the past to reach out to then–prime minister Irakli Gharibashvili, hoping to convince him to declare a state of emergency to protect the trees, but without result.



According to Tbilisi City hall, 'The trees have been drying out from 1997–1998', but the visible signs occurred only recently. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)



Tbilisi Ecoservice group plans to cut down over 20,000 trees. (Tamuna Chkareuli/OC Media)

The Municipal Department of Environmental Protection told *OC Media* that they are preparing a two-year, detailed plan to improve the health of Tbilisi's trees.

A Spanish team of experts from the Projar Group, an environmental consultancy and services company, assessed the city's trees in 2018, after which private company Real Energy won a tender to spray the trees, with 120,000 trees treated so far.

Meanwhile, City Hall's EcoService group plans to fell over 20,000 diseased trees. This year, they also hope to introduce new technologies to treat trees, such as by directly injecting trees with pesticides, as well as focus on replanting the affected areas.

Comments

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