Quantified Tree Risk Assessment

Newsletter summer 2009

The National Tree Safety Group (UK)

The National Tree Safety Group was formed from a wide range of stakeholder organisations following concerns over the increasingly disparate and risk averse approaches to tree safety management. The group has an inclusive policy with a wide and expanding participation from governmental and non-governmental members representing the interests of tree owners, managers, surveyors etc.

The National Tree Safety Group seeks to balance the risks and benefits from trees, to inform reasonable guidance for landowners, professionals and practitioners responsible for trees. The group seeks to inform reasonable discharge of legal duties whilst taking account of safety in the widest possible public interest.

Having held a well-attended national conference in 2008, the group has commissioned a university study into the risks from trees and a review of the legal framework for tree related safety. The intention is to inform a 'risk philosophy' to guide owners, managers and professionals in their tree management responsibilities.

Tree Risk Assessment Standards

Is the drive to standardise tree safety management of benefit, and if it is, who are the beneficiaries? There has been a recent drive by some sectors of the arboricultural industry to produce standard guidance and recommendations for tree survey and tree risk assessment, but the true purpose of these standards is less than clear. For whatever reason, some tree specialists appear to be seeking to impose an onerous burden upon both their peers and tree owners, when recent advances in tree risk management have demonstrated that the risks from trees are often very low and in some situations require no survey of trees whatsoever.

In the United Kingdom, there have been moves from the British Standards Institution towards the development of a National Standard for tree safety inspection. The draft Standard BS8516: 2008 'Recommendations for tree safety inspection' received a mixed and often negative response both from stakeholder groups and individuals. The draft Standard is currently on hold awaiting the outcome of the National Tree Safety Group's study into tree risk. Mike Ellison's extensive consultation comments can be downloaded from the QTRA website and should be helpful for anyone who might be affected by the proposed Standard, but hasn't had the opportunity to analyse the document.

The United States has seen increased activity in the standardisation of tree safety, with the American National Standards Institute

Becoming a licensed user

Training Calendar 2009

UNITED KINGDOM

QTRA Training

08 July	Lyme Park, Cheshire,
14 July	Exeter University , Devon
20 July	Antrim University, Antrim
22/23 Sept	Merrist Wood College , Surrey

Practitioners Guide to Visual Tree Assessment

09 July	Lyme Park , Cheshire
15 July	Exeter University , Devon
21 July	Antrim University, Antrim
24 Sept	Merrist Wood College , Surrey

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currently developing an ANSI Standard covering tree safety and tree risk assessment. With its base in North America, the International Society of Arboriculture is currently developing best management practice guidance for Tree Risk Assessment. In May 2008, the ISA issued a questionnaire on the subject of defect and risk assessment protocols, which was followed up in February this year by a seminar and Risk Assessment Summit in North Carolina.

The production of National and industry Standards could have wide ranging consequences for landowners and those advising on tree safety. Get involved and have a say in your own future and that of your industry.

The Utility of the QTRA Approach

Arborists are engaged by landowners to assess the safety of trees, often with the express intention of establishing whether or not the trees are 'safe'. Frequently, there is the expectation that liability can be shifted from the landowner onto the arborist and their professional indemnity insurer, but in reality, it is all too easy for the arborist to place the liability squarely back with the landowner by specifying some form of remedial work and by placing time limits on their advice. How else can the arborist reasonably deal with the question of 'safe or unsafe'? An inevitable result of this 'risk table-tennis' is that many landowners spend far more on tree safety than is reasonable and many more spend nothing.

By sharing the risk management process between landowners and the arborists they employ, a reasonable position can be reached where both discharge their duty of care without disproportionate cost. The cost of tree safety management extends far beyond the financial, with potential degradation of the landscape, ecological resources and the wider amenity.

An ideal position would be where the arborist puts a reasonable and proportionate effort into the assessment of risk from trees and the provision of advice, which then equips the landowner to make sound decisions in the context of their management priorities and available resources. This is where QTRA comes into its own. The probabilistic approach enables the arborist to supply the odds of harm arising from tree failure and the landowner can use these odds to guide the allocation of resources in tree safety management.

New Two Day QTRA Training Workshop

A frequent request is that we provide QTRA training over a period of two days and include more fieldwork. There is an inevitable cost increase in this approach but, for those who are able to take the extra time, there are definite benefits, particularly with the extended application of the method. We have scheduled our first two-day workshop at Merrist Wood College in Surrey, UK on 22 -23 September 2009.

Making the Most of Quantified Tree Risk Assessment

Although the QTRA method was originally designed to risk-assess individual trees, through continued use and development, it has become clear that the greatest benefits are realised when the system is applied at a strategic level. With considerable savings to be made not only in budgets but also in terms of tree, landscape and ecological benefits, can you afford to overlook this simplified tree assessment process?

Training Calendar 2009

EIRE

QTRA Training
29 June Dublin, Ireland

Practitioners Guide to Visual Tree Assessment
30 June Dublin, Ireland

AUSTRALIA

QTRA Training
20 August Brisbane, Qld.

24 August Canberra, NSW

27 August Melbourne, Vic.

01 Sept Adelaide, SA

Practitioners Guide to Visual Tree Assessment
21 August Brisbane, Qld.

25 August Canberra, NSW

02 Sept Adelaide, SA

The strategic approach can be applied wherever there is risk from the failure of trees. For anyone managing a large tree stock and the associated duty of care, the scale of the task can lead to reactive management and inconsistent decision making, whereas a simple overview of tree risk will enable the balanced and proportionate allocation of resources. In view of the often limited funds available for tree management and the need to provide 'best value,' QTRA can be an invaluable management tool.

By evaluating the relationship between trees and land use, the strategic target assessment broadly quantifies the value of those things that could be affected by tree failure. This exercise can be carried out at a local scale, such as within a park or residential area, or on a large scale, such as across a road network or a council's entire administrative area. Assignment of probabilistic target values to land-uses or road classifications can provide a good starting point where resources are limited. Strategic assessments provide a baseline evaluation that can be refined as resources allow or if detail is required.

There are a range of tree assessment techniques that can be applied within the QTRA framework to provide highly effective tools for tree risk management. In the vast majority of situations, individual tree inspections will provide little more useful information than can be obtained from a less intensive drive-by or walkover survey. Is it really necessary to allocate substantial budgets to individual tree inspections if the objective is the reasonable management of what is generally already a very low risk?

"I like trees but…." is a sound bite oft quoted by tree managers when discussing unreasonable pressures on trees. Perhaps we should ask ourselves whether or not we are applying similar principles to tree risk management; "I like trees but.....just in case".

Constantly putting tree safety under the microscope and seeking ever increasing detail leads to risk-aversion and perversely degrades social, ecological and landscape benefits whilst expending increasing budgets on risk control. Using the strategic assessment techniques, QTRA can help to provide a reasonable framework for tree risk management, resulting in more proportionate resource allocation, and less of an impact on our tree populations.