



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
MINISTRY OF CULTURE

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Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights
United Nations Human Rights Council
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Nature conservation and cultural rights

Dear Ms Alexandra Xanthaki!

I'm happy to respond to the call for submissions in the field of cultural rights.

Estonian Ministry of Culture is happy to respond to your call for submissions in the field of cultural rights and share the example of good practices in the field of relevant issue.

The description of the project can be found in the appendix to this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Eda Silberg
Undersecretary for Cultural Diversity

Additional recipients:

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Appendix 1 on 2 pages:

Preservation of cross tree forests as a way to safeguard
the intangible cultural heritage in Estonia

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Appendix 1

Input to the Call for submissions from the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

Conservation projects, measures and policies that have involved traditional and/or local knowledges, languages, ways of life and practices in their elaboration and implementation (paragraph number 4)

Entity making the contribution: Estonian Ministry of Culture, Department of the Cultural Diversity

Subject: Preservation of cross tree forests as a way to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage in Estonia

Estonian cross tree forests, typically coniferous or mixed woodlands, are located near cemeteries or along church roads on the edge of the forest between the villages and the graveyard. Cross trees and cross tree forests have a long-standing role in Estonian folk beliefs and funeral customs.

Southeast Estonia is a culturally distinct region, characterized by its dialect, traditional rural lifestyle, and ancestral customs. Today, the tradition of cross trees has nearly disappeared across Estonia, except in Southeast Estonia, where it remains an active part of funeral practices. As a result, cross trees and forests have emerged along roadsides, with each cross linked to a specific funeral. This tradition forms part of the region's intangible cultural heritage and supports nature conservation. The custom of carving crosses dates back to the 17th century and has persisted continuously for centuries. This custom is meaningful to the identity and way of life of the local community. By cutting a cross on a tree on the way to the graveyard relatives bid final farewell to the deceased. Similar practices were once common in neighboring countries such as Finland and Latvia, and more broadly across Estonia.

As part of South Estonian funeral customs, cross trees and forests are listed in Estonia's inventory of intangible cultural heritage, which follows the principles of UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, recognizing it as a living tradition. According to Estonia's Heritage Conservation Act, cross tree forests are under national protection, and their preservation is essential for passing down Southeast Estonia's funeral customs from generation to generation. The local community also refers to cross trees as sacred trees, and their cutting has traditionally been condemned. Folkloric records about religious and ritual activities in cross tree forests have been preserved as well.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, the National Heritage Board, the Estonian Folk Culture Centre, the University of Tartu, the Maavalla Koda (Estonian House of Taara and Native Religions) the Võru Institute, the State Forest Management Centre, the Estonian Green Movement, the Environmental Board, and the local community, logging in Estonia's cross tree forests in Southeast Estonia has been halted since 2021. This cultural connection with nature promotes environmental awareness and sustainable development, where traditional knowledge complements science-based nature conservation. Declaring cross tree forests as cultural monuments ensures their preservation and allows the tradition of cross carving to be continued. Of the hundreds of former cross tree forests, approximately 25 have survived either fully or partially. The exact locations of cross forests can be viewed via the Estonian Land and Spatial Agency's cross tree map application. This application is intended for use by the State Forest Management Centre and local residents.

The data for the cross tree map layer, completed in 2016 by the Estonian Land and Spatial Agency, originates from folklorist Ms Marju Kõivupuu's cross tree database composed in year 2000 and fieldwork conducted in collaboration with the Estonian Ministry of the Environment and the Environmental Board in 2015. In 2021, the map layer was updated with tips from local residents and

data from the Estonian State Forest Management Centre's heritage culture map and the Foundation of the Hiite Maja (House of Sacred Groves) sacred site map. The Estonian Environmental Board, in cooperation with the National Heritage Board, is responsible for refining the information about cross trees. The map application was developed on the request of the Estonian Environmental Board.

References:

1. Estonian Land and Spatial Agency map application: <https://geoportaal.maaamet.ee/est/Kaardirakendused/Ristipuud/Ristipuude-kaardirakenduse-kirjeldus-p540.html>
2. Estonian Intangible Cultural Heritage List: <https://rahvakultuur.ee/2020/03/28/vana-voromaa-matusekombestik/>
3. Decisions made by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Estonia regarding the protection of cross forests and cross trees:
 - 3.1. Declaration of Rosma Cross Forest as a cultural monument on January 3, 2020: [Rosma ristimetsa kultuurimälestiseks tunnistamine–Riigi Teataja](#)
 - 3.2 Declaration of 14 cross trees and cross forests as cultural monuments in Estonia on June 22, 2021: [Ristimetsade kultuurimälestiseks tunnistamine–Riigi Teataja](#)
4. Hiite Maja (House of Sacred Groves) Foundation: <https://hiis.ee/en/sacred-sites/sns2007/marju-torp-koivupuu>