

CHANGING ATTITUDES

Dieback vivifies GM support

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Credit: Ian Redding/Alamy Stock Photo

When faced with charismatic plants that are under threat, seemingly firm attitudes against genetic modification (GM) may be malleable according to research from Paul Jepson and Irina Arakelyan. Such a stance could reflect updated views about the balance of nature and the efficacy of ‘meddling’ with species.

Native European ash trees, *Fraxinus Excelsior*, are currently suffering a dieback in the United Kingdom caused by the fungal pathogen *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*. This has captured the public’s attention and produced a widely held belief that the UK government has not done enough to protect forest areas. Multiple responses to the threat have been proposed, ranging from ‘letting nature run its course’ to creating fungal-resistant trees within a decade by using genetic modification and resistance genes from other species.

Surveying the general public, the researchers found that more people approved of the GM options for saving the ash trees over doing nothing, even while respondents were generally anti-GM and believed that humans should not tamper with nature in the abstract. Younger and more educated respondents were even more relaxed about GM and intervening to save the species. This is in contrast with older, rural respondents who preferred planting different native trees, and policy experts who question the morality and financial justification of intervention in the first place.

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