



Thirty-five years ago, Larry Tribe wrote an article called “Ways Not to Think About Plastic Trees,” probing the foundations of environmental law. The article prompted an equally interesting response from environmental philosopher [Mark Sagoff](#). The issue was whether we should preserve nature simply for its utility to humans or whether it had other types of value.

Plastic trees now seem to be making a revival, according to a recent [report](#), again prompting the question of whether we care about the “natural” apart from its utility to us:

Trees are great absorbers of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and inhibitors of climate change — that’s why treehuggers hug them so much. But leave it to humanity to engineer a better tree. A synthetic tree, currently being tested as a prototype, ensnares carbon about 1,000 times faster than a real tree.

The “tree” uses plastic leaves that capture the carbon dioxide in a chamber. The carbon dioxide is then compressed into liquid form. The tree captures the carbon without the need for direct sunlight, which means that, unlike traditional trees, the synthetic trees can be stored in enclosed places such as barns, used anywhere, and transported from one site to another regardless of conditions.