

Tree Risk Assessment – Use or Abuse of the TRAQ Form

THE TREE RISK ASSESSMENT Qualification (TRAQ) was designed to provide a systematic process for assessing tree risk. Part of the process was to devise a simple field data collection form. The form now used in teaching the course went through many iterations before it was released. When teaching the course it is always noted that although use of the form is mandatory for the course, it is not mandatory to use the form in your everyday field work.

The TRAQ form is designed to help the user collect data. Not all boxes need to be checked because many times there is nothing relevant to the assessment in hand. For the three Likelihood of Failure boxes dealing with Crown, Trunk, and Roots if there are no issues of concern the user would note None for Main Concerns, the Load on Defect would be not applicable, and the Likelihood of Failure would be Improbable. Apart from basic details about the locations, date and time frame, many other parts of the first page could conceivably be left unchecked.

Several users have contacted me and asked if the forms must be used in all assessments. The answer is an emphatic no! The TRAQ field data form was designed to serve as a way to collect information. There are other ways to do that, including written field notes, photographs, and tape recordings. It is up to the assessor to decide how best to collect and record the information that is important to the risk rating. You may choose to use the TRAQ form but it is not mandatory. I do not use it, preferring instead to document factors of importance with written notes and photographs.

Apparently, some Cities or municipal staff are now requesting that every tree assessed must be accompanied by a completed TRAQ form. Quite why that would be requested is not clear. The TRAQ form was never designed or intended to be used as an audit trail. One wonders what do staff think they gain


by requiring a form for each tree? In many cases staff are not qualified to assess whether or not the form has been correctly used. Even if staff were themselves qualified in the TRAQ programme it is doubtful that they can render a judgement about the tree unless they have actually visited the site themselves. Even then, the very nature of tree risk assessment is subjective, so would staff automatically be able to contradict the initial assessor's opinion? It is very unlikely the TRAQ form could be used as a means of quality control.

As one of the panel members involved in the design of the TRAQ course, including the process, the form, and the training course, I know that the data collection form was never intended be used in this way. What staff or clients should expect is a well written report. We teach that in the TRAQ course and we provide sample reports in the course materials. By itself the TRAQ form is of very limited use as part of any submission. Simply ticking boxes on a form is not a good enough approach. Anyone wanting to review tree risk assessment work should expect to see the following components of a report:

1. Site address, date of assessment, assessor's name, client's name.
2. Synopsis of site conditions, ideally with photographs.
3. The Level of Assessment undertaken, and any additional tools or tests conducted.
4. Some details about any issues of concern, why they are of concern (or not) and the associated risk ratings of Likelihood of Impact, Likelihood of Failure, and Consequences leading to the final risk rating, as well as a timeframe for Likelihood of Failure, and the reinspection period (and no, that does not need to be every year).
5. If required, suggested ways in which identified risks can be reduced by mitigation, and what the residual risk would be if such measures were implemented.

6. Any other relevant factors.
7. The limitations that affect the risk assessment undertaken.

Once such a report is written, the field collection notes whether written on the ISA field data form, or in some other manner, become less relevant. The report should be capable of standing on its own, and the writer should include all of the information relevant to the identified risk assessment levels.

Hopefully, the concept of requiring a completed TRAQ form for every tree and every submission will not gain traction. That is an abuse of what was intended, and it serves no defensible purpose. It is more likely to make assessors think all they have to do is tick every box to have an acceptable submission. Or worse yet, to have reviewers reject assessments because they feel some boxes were left unchecked. Either scenario is wrong and reflects a lack of understanding. You need to write a well formed report that clearly documents the site, the tree, the assessed risk levels and how you think these can be managed. Anything less than that may be something that City staff should reflect on, but automatically requiring a completed TRAQ form is wrong, and should not be a mandatory part of risk assessment reporting. 

Julian Dunster designed, implemented and taught the original Tree Risk Assessment Course and Exam (TRACE) that created the Certified Tree Risk Assessment credential – the first such credential for arborists in North America. He was one of the panel of experts that created the TRAQ programme and training course, and wrote the course manual for TRAQ and TRACE. He has instructed TRACE and TRAQ in several parts of the world. He can be contacted by email at jd@dunster.ca.