





Forest bathing

Carlos Ponte and Emma Wisser from Universe Mindfulness provide an introduction to the benefits of Shinrin-yoku

Shinrin-yoku is a Japanese term that literally translates as 'forest bathing'. It refers to immersing oneself in a forest and deeply connecting with this natural environment through the senses.

The term was coined in 1982 by the director of the Japanese Forestry Agency, Akiyama Tomohide, as part of an initiative to attract people to Japan's forests. The aim was to stimulate relaxation and improve wellbeing in forest visitors, with the hope that if the woodlands were considered as a source of health restoration rather than just a resource, it would also spark a sense of protectiveness and encourage conservation.

The place where it all started is called Akasawa Forest, located near Agematsu Town in the Nagano Prefecture. It comprises 1,800 acres of coniferous forest and is largely made up of the Kiso Hinoki cypress. There are eight active trails with an average length of two kilometres, one of which is fully wheelchair accessible.

This forested area has been protected since the mid-1600s. In 1970, it became the first natural recreation forest in Japan and the first forest bathing event was held there in 1982. approximately 100,000 people visit Akasawa Forest, mostly workers sent on a regular basis by major corporations based in Tokyo.





After two hours of...	Seated forest viewing (eg. for those with mobility issues)	Forest walking
Cortisol concentration (from saliva)	↓ 13.4%	↓ 15.8%
Pulse rate	↓ 6.0%	↓ 3.9%
Systolic blood pressure	↓ 1.7%	↓ 1.9%
Diastolic blood pressure	↓ 1.6%	↓ 2.1%
Parasympathetic nerve activity (which calms the body)	↑ 56%	↑ 102%
Sympathetic nerve activity (which stimulates the body)	↓ 18%	↓ 19.4%



Dr Miyazaki and Carlos Ponte

Physiological benefits of forest bathing

Intuitively, most of us feel great when we go into the woods. However, there is an abundance of scientific data telling us why that is and what happens to our bodies when we spend time being mindful in the forest, or in nature generally.

It was Dr Yoshifumi Miyazaki who pioneered and led the very first studies into the physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku, back in 1990. At the time, he was fortuitously approached by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation, NHK, which funded his early research as part of a documentary programme.

Dr Miyazaki created the term 'forest therapy' in 2003, after years of scientific findings backed the positive physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku on the human body.

While it would be exceedingly difficult to condense the findings of 30 years' research into one short sentence, the table left, from a book by Dr Miyazaki, summarises the key results (Miyazaki Y, 2018).

I (Carlos) had the great honour of meeting Dr Miyazaki during a trip to Japan in 2018 as you can see from the picture above. He famously tells people, 'Humans and our direct ancestors have evolved in nature for approximately seven million years. Migration to urban environments began during the industrial revolution, only a few centuries ago, so in essence we have spent over 99.99% of our

existence in nature.' In other words, nature is in our DNA and it is our original, ancient home.

Furthermore, research by Dr Qing Li, President of the Japanese Society of Forest Medicine, has shown the positive effects forest bathing has on the immune system (Li Q, 2010).

How forest bathing differs to other outdoor activities

Shinrin-yoku does not involve strenuous physical exercise, in fact, it is practically the opposite. The essence of forest bathing is to perform a very slow walk – usually two hours in length – with frequent pauses along the trail, to allow a deep connection with the environment through the senses. The reason for this is because even the anticipation of exercise can spark a rush of

adrenaline, which the body would interpret as a signal for the 'fight or flight' response, which can result in stress.

Using the senses to connect with the environment might include feeling the texture of tree bark and leaves; watching insects or other woodland creatures go about their business; noting the different smells of the forest; feeling the movement and temperature of the water in a small stream; or offering participants a tea made solely from spruce needles, sourced from our local herbal store. Forest bathing is both a body and mind experience, which induces relaxation and is an important preventative healthcare practice. It is also defined by many as a deeply spiritual experience.

Shinrin-yoku is not mutually exclusive to physical exercise and can, in fact, complement the well-known health benefits of a moderate or strenuous form of outdoor physical activity, if incorporated towards the end of a session, as part of a 'wind down'.

Emma explains the benefits of reconnecting with nature through forest bathing and mindfulness...

Stress is the root cause of many modern-day diseases. Richard Louv, the author of *Last Child in the Woods*, speaks of 'nature deficit syndrome' as a phenomena in modern societies, which has negative effects on our bodies and psyche, causing deterioration of sensual experiences,





attention deficit problems and different physical and emotional illnesses. Research has shown that people who live in cities are 40% more likely to suffer from depression compared to people living in the countryside or rural areas (Lederbogen F et al, 2011).

It seems obvious that reconnecting with nature will help to reduce stress and will show us a way to reconnect with ourselves and become whole and fully



Beginner tips for forest bathing

As well as signposting you to local forests, Forestry England's website (forestryengland.uk) offers some beginner's tips for forest bathing...

- Turn off your devices to give yourself the best chance of relaxing, being mindful and enjoying a sensory forest-based experience.
- Slow down. Move through the forest slowly so you can see and feel more.
- Take long breaths deep into the abdomen. Extending the exhalation of air to twice the length of the inhalation sends a message to the body that it can relax.
- Stop, stand or sit, smell what's around you, what can you smell?
- Take in your surroundings using all of your senses. How does the forest environment make you feel? Be observant, look at nature's small details.
- Sit quietly using mindful observation; try to avoid thinking about your to-do list or issues related to daily life. You might be surprised by the number of wild forest inhabitants you see using this process.
- Keep your eyes open. The colours of nature are soothing, and studies have shown that people relax best while seeing greens and blues.
- Stay as long as you can. Start with a comfortable time limit and build up to the recommended two hours for a complete forest bathing experience.

Enhancing the effects of holistic treatments

Forest bathing is considered as a form of holistic medicine in its own right, but the measurable and deeply effective physiological effects generated by Shinrin-yoku could be a highly valuable way of preparing a client to receive any other form of holistic treatment. Where a holistic therapy can be done outdoors, specifically in a forested area, it would be much more effective, as the body and mind

become more receptive to the effects of the treatment. If the type of holistic therapy is not portable, the treatment outcomes could still be enhanced if a two-hour Shinrin-yoku session was completed first. Alternatively, therapists could bring the forest into the treatment room, by asking if the client would like pine essential oil placed in a diffuser or to hear a recording of sounds from the forest.

human again. Forest bathing is a way of reconnecting with nature, based on its foundation, which is mindfulness.

A Shinrin-yoku forest walk comprises mindfulness and focused attention exercises, mainly by using our senses. As we take in the atmosphere of the forest, nature draws our attention towards its beauty, its display of diversity, its wonder and magic. We find that we naturally want to be present and awake, which takes us away from our thoughts and worries and into the present moment.


Mindfulness in nature also guides us towards our 'inner home' – the stillness, peace, and love that is always at our core. Like Eckart Tolle says, 'Watch a tree, a flower, a plant, let your awareness rest on them, how still they are, deeply rooted in Being. Allow nature to teach you stillness.'

Shinrin-yoku, as well as mindfulness in nature, are not necessarily limited to being physically in a forest. Research carried out at University of Exeter and Uppsala University in Sweden showed that people who spend two hours a week in nature are 'significantly more likely' to report good health and psychological wellbeing. And there is always nature around us, even in cities. So just stop from time-to-time and look up to the sky, feel its spaciousness. Watch birds in the trees or spend a minute and explore the shape of a tree, its leaves. Watch grasses and flowers moving and swaying in the wind and feel the wind on your face. There are limitless possibilities to connect with nature in the heart.

Although Mother Nature is not always friendly and peaceful, and can even be threatening, we can still find important qualities in her that help us as human beings to navigate through our lives and difficult times, in particular – think of nature's resilience, unstoppable power

of renewal, unconditional giving, joy and wisdom, to name but a few.

Being out in nature with an open mind and heart is like looking into a mirror – the mirror of nature. We receive nature's qualities effortlessly. By feeling these qualities in nature, we feel them in ourselves, such as non-judgmental and accepting presence, unconditional generosity, and love. This again can enhance our own mindful abilities.

The forest is our ancient home – so is this planet. What are we inspired to do to protect our home, inside and outside? 

References

For full references, go to fht.org.uk/IT-133-forest-bathing



Carlos Ponte has always had a passion for forests, studying Shinrin-yoku techniques in England, Germany and Japan.

He also developed a Forest Therapy program, influenced by his mentor, Dr Yoshifumi Miyazaki. **Emma Wisser** is a certified mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) trainer and for the past 16 years has taught mindfulness and self-compassion at her practice in Germany and at various public organizations and private corporations. Carlos and Emma co-founded Universe Mindfulness, offering wellness escapes throughout Europe with the main theme of Mindfulness in Nature. To access some free resources, including a nature meditation, and discounts, visit universe-mindfulness.com/fht