

## Forest Bathing: Salcey Forest

As part of the Forestry England (FE) and Sport England 'Active Forests' Programme, a Forest Bathing participant was interviewed after the activity at Salcey Forest, with the Activity Leader present. Five women, aged 40 - 50+, attended the activity.



### Forest bathing

Forest bathing (or *shinrin-yoku*) is a meditative practice originating in Japan in the 1980s. The sessions run once every two months on Saturdays, and are provided by an external Activity Leader (AL). The AL sets some ground rules at the start of the session, including 'the three Cs': Care for the forest ourselves, each other and the environment (e.g. looking out for other forest users and not picking anything still growing), Calm (no checking phones or talking) and Comfort. She then led the group along the main gravel path, allowing participants to 'get the chat out of their system' before the main session, so they could get to know each other or catch up with friends. The group were then invited to take a seat at a circle of tree stumps in a beechwood clearing, where the AL explained the background to forest bathing.

### Motivations

The AL invited participants in turn to share their motivations for attending. Two mentioned family: one participant had wanted to reconnect with her father's love of trees after he passed away, while another mentioned that her mother had encouraged her appreciation of nature. Some of the group were going through significant life changes such as retirement or divorce. All five participants were attending for the first time. However, many already practiced some form of meditation or yoga, and two friends who had each travelled one hour to meet at Salcey, had tried forest bathing previously on a yoga retreat. The other three participants were all locals who visit Salcey Forest regularly for walks alone or with friends, and to participate in other Active Forests activities such as Nordic walking.

### Benefits

The AL led the group through the woods, stopping to focus on each of the five senses. For participants, the forest was an intrinsically '*relaxing and non-demanding environment*', with the sensory aspect playing an important role in promoting mental wellbeing.

*'The forest is naturally quite sensory anyway, especially with the wind and things..., the countryside and nature is quite meditative in its own right.'*

**Smell**

Participants were invited to collect objects (e.g. pinecones, moss) before regrouping to smell them. They were then invited to take turns speaking in a sharing circle. Smells evoked childhood memories of making mud pies and being taken to the woods by parents.

**Vision**

The AL encouraged participants to focus on what they could see in the far distance, middle-distance and foreground, and to notice details and textures. *AL: 'people notice stuff and they're like, I've come here every week for ten years and I've never noticed this before...one of the ladies was saying in one of the visual things...It was something about something at a different angle. And she was like, I've never even noticed that before.'*

**Taste**

The AL offered participants nettle tea to drink from plastic cups, before a final 'relaxation session' where participants were invited to lie on mats or sit against a tree. Participants mentioned feeling supported by and connected to the trees and the earth.

**Touch**

Participants were invited to spend five minutes touching trees and found objects with their fingers, the backs of their hands and faces. Participants noticed different textures (e.g. tree bark, fir fronds), the firmness of tree trunks and the softness of leaf litter. Two participants said that touching the trees felt 'intimate' and 'sensual', noting how touch is used in human relationships to get to know other people.

**Sound**

The AL encouraged participants to listen as they walked by cupping their ears to magnify the sounds, before sitting in a clearing and closing their eyes to listen to the sounds of birds, traffic, the wind moving through the trees and the rain intensifying before dying away. Several mentioned enjoying the sound of the rain and listening to recordings to help with falling asleep.

## Social Aspect

Participants considered the social aspect less important for forest bathing than other activities (e.g. Nordic walking) where chatting is encouraged.

*'I think some activities are good not to talk. I don't feel... in the same way I don't feel the need to have constant music or as someone called it, verbal wallpaper at home, I don't need to chat all the time either and I think it was fairly obvious it wasn't going to be a chatty session.'*

Forest bathing offered a sensory experience, enabling participants to relax and connect with their surroundings. Emphasis was on the individual experience, rather than the social aspect. For many participants it was a chance to try a new activity and gain a new perspective on a familiar environment.

**Funding:** Sport England and Forestry England

**Website:** [Active Forests Programme Evaluation: Phase 2 - Forest Research](#)