

Yoga in the Forest: Sherwood Pines

As part of the Forestry England (FE) and Sport England 'Active Forests' Programme, a focus group was run with 'Yoga in the Forest' participants at Sherwood Pines. There were 6 participants, all women aged 40 - 50+, and all first-time participants, although they were familiar with yoga. Four of the women joined the focus group discussion after the activity, and the Activity Leader (AL) and Active Forests Coordinator (AFC) were interviewed separately.



Yoga in the Forest

Yoga sessions began in spring, run by an FE staff member who is also a trained yoga coach. This dual role means the AL is well placed to bring 'yoga' into the 'forest', as well as being available at the visitor centre to promote the sessions, which run on Friday mornings over a block of 5 weeks. In spring there were usually around 18 participants, including regulars; during summer there have been fewer participants due to people being on holiday. However, this has enabled a different demographic to participate: two participants were parents who had time off work during the school holidays. The session took place on the grass near the visitor centre. Participants placed their mats in a semi-circle facing the instructor, who led the group through different poses.

Motivations

All participants practiced yoga in conventional studio settings; they saw Yoga in the Forest as unsuitable for beginners. Two participants were regulars at the AL's class at a nearby village and had been invited to join the session at Sherwood. Two had travelled an hour to the forest looking specifically for a Vinyasa yoga class, which emphasises the flow between different poses, and were spending the day at Sherwood with their families:

AL: 'It's funny because people who love yoga just love yoga and will just try going to as many different places as possible to do yoga. They tend to be active people anyway and know the benefit and it just makes them feel so much better.'

Holding the sessions in the forest was 'exciting' and further motivation for participation.

Benefits

Participants appreciated the fresh air and natural, non-intrusive sounds of the forest, compared with being confined to an 'oppressive' indoor space. Both participants and the AL highlighted the calming effect of the forest environment. The sensory experience and an awareness of surroundings are especially important for yoga as a meditative practice. The feeling of the breeze and warm sunshine, the textures of pinecones on the ground, looking up and seeing blue sky, listening to the sounds of people and dogs ... all of these aspects of the forest environment contributed to the experience and a feeling of relaxation amongst participants:

Female 1: 'The general environment is as you say beautiful, I mean I think it gives you that, that good starting point for feeling relaxed.'

Female 2: 'And I think yoga is all about that as well and it's about getting in that mindset and I think when you're outside it's easier to do and it's much more.'

AL: 'I almost don't know how you quantify it, because if you were doing yoga in a multistorey car park, it wouldn't be as good, would it? Whereas when you're here, irrelevant of the sun or whatever, you've got the noise of the trees, you've got the noise of the people, you've got the smells, you've got birds, you've got the dog barking. It's just lovely, peaceful.'

Challenges

Forest environment 'challenges' were seen as adding to the experience, rather than detracting from it:

Female 1: 'Even the feel of the ground it's uneven and slightly uphill but it's just a different experience it wasn't a negative experience.'

Female 2: 'It makes you work harder.'

Interviewer: 'So, they're not problems then, it's just a different...'

Female 3: 'No, they just enhance the experience don't they, it's just nice having it, doing it in a different environment.'

Unpredictable weather was seen as the real challenge, as holding the yoga session in the forest classroom would take away from the forest experience; for this reasons classes stop for autumn and winter. Both participants and the AL felt an outdoor canopy would enable sessions to continue in rainy weather. The distance of travel required also meant that the participants interviewed saw the sessions as one-off events, rather than something they would attend regularly.

Yoga in the Forest offered a calming, sensory experience and new challenges for those already familiar with practicing yoga in an indoor setting. The classes had not been running for long but had already proven popular, with regular attendees in spring and one-off attendees joining as part of a day out in the summer.

Funding: Sport England and Forestry England

Website: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/active-forests-programme-evaluation-pilot-phase/active-forests-programme-reports-and-publications/>