

Forest Bathing: Salcey Forest

As part of the Forestry England (FE) and Sport England 'Active Forests' Programme, the Forest Bathing Activity Leader (AL) was interviewed after the session at Salcey Forest. The Active Forests Coordinator (AFC) was also interviewed separately.



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). Five female participants aged 40-50+ attended. After setting some ground rules, the AL led the group through the forest, stopping to focus the group's attention on each of the five senses.

Motivations

The AL was already working as a personal fitness coach before starting the forest bathing sessions at Salcey two years ago. She outlined her motivations for training as a forest guide with the Forest Bathing Institute:

'I'd taken up mindfulness meditation a few years beforehand as a way of me managing anxiety and depression. So, I knew that was really helpful for me. I also knew that being outdoors seemed really good for my wellbeing as well. So, when I heard about forest bathing, I was like, this sounds perfect for me because it's a combination of the two...I was at a point where with my personal fitness training I was like, I know this helps people but wanting to have that extra psychological aspect, to help people on a deeper level as well.'

Benefits

The AL described how the mindfulness aspect of forest bathing is *'a really powerful tool for helping people to relax and rewind'*. The *'gently engaging'* forest environment was felt to facilitate a calm and meditative mindset:

'It seems to be much easier for people when they're outside to... they get really engaged and absorbed in nature.'

The AL did not consider forest bathing to be a *'physical activity because we're only moving very slowly. So, it's more about the wellbeing side of things, to enable people to be mindful and tune in to their senses you need to be moving quite slowly or to stop altogether.'*

However, she explained that forest bathing has also been found to improve physical health conditions such as high blood pressure:

'You get all that lovely stuff of the visual, the audio, the touch and the smell...but then you also get ... the chemicals that are produced by the trees as well... Some of the research is that up to 50% of the benefits that they're measuring from forest bathing, could come from the chemicals.'

As the AL led the group through the woods she encouraged participants to take deep breaths to absorb some of these beneficial phytoncides, likening them to the essential oils used in aromatherapy.

Social Aspect

The AL highlighted that running the sessions as *'one off taster introductions'* prevented relationships building over time, and hoped to run regular sessions in the future to *'build a community'*. However, she pointed out that the sharing circles during the session offer a space for socialising, with participants often thanking the group for their support. Although forest bathing focuses on individual experience, the AL felt that offering an organised activity enables people new to mindfulness to receive guidance, as well as providing a safe and liberating space:

'Feedback that we get quite often from people when they come forest bathing is that they really love things like being able to lie underneath the trees, and be able to look up and things like that, and actually, they feel being in a group and being led by someone gives them the permission and lets them feel safe and looked after to do that.'

Challenges and future development

Finding a suitable site initially had been challenging, as it needed to have a car park and toilets while not being too busy; the presence of other noisy visitors was felt to negatively impact the forest bathing experience. The AFC felt the main constraint for *'wellbeing activities'* was the weather and is hoping to build a shelter which could be hired out; however, the AL emphasised that the real challenge was to ensure participants dressed appropriately for the weather, as they often underestimated how cold they would be when moving slowly. Raising awareness around forest bathing was another challenge mentioned, as *'people think it involves swimming'* (AFC). The AL and AFC are hoping to improve participant diversity through targeted sessions for harder-to-reach groups and a taster day of activities offered on site. The AL is also hoping forest bathing can in future be prescribed as a cost-effective treatment for a range of health conditions in the UK, as it is in Japan.

Forest bathing offers benefits for both mental and physical wellbeing. Although the social aspect is not central, a group setting provides support for new forest bathers.

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/>