

Yoga & Forest Bathing Retreat, Salcey Forest

- The half-day retreat was an enjoyable experience for participants, who felt it let them escape and feel more relaxed and peaceful.
- They were keen to do the activities, and try new activities, in the forest again.

- This case study focuses on the yoga and forest bathing half day retreat held at Salcey Forest in March 2024.
- The researchers joined the group whilst they took part in the activities. This case study is based on observations made during the activities in addition to conversations had during a focus group with five of the participants.
- All participants were female and aged between 35 and 65. Two participants identified as British Asian and three identified as White. Participants did not state that they have any disabilities or long-term health conditions.



Yoga and forest bathing

This case study is based on a half-day retreat held in Salcey Forest by two local activity providers (Time Seekers and Wilder Lives), as part of the Active Forests programme. The retreat started with an hour of yoga suitable for all abilities, with a focus on breath work. This session took place in 'The Glade' which is an open space recently created in the forest with a shelter for hosting activities and events in. The session was held largely outside of the shelter as the weather was pleasant. Participants were required to bring their own yoga mats but were provided with other equipment where necessary (e.g. yoga blocks). After the yoga session, the participants had a break where they enjoyed refreshments and had a chance to socialise with each other. The second part of the retreat was a two-hour forest bathing session, where participants took part in a slow walk around the forest guided by the instructor. The aim of forest bathing is to help participants tune into their senses, connect with nature, and relax. It therefore involved activities which helped pay mindful attention to the forest environment (e.g. by listening to the sounds of nature). The session also involved light physical activities such as crouching down to explore the details in the forest and climbing over forest debris and streams. The retreat was for those aged 18 and over and cost £30 per person to attend.

Motivations

A key reason the group were motivated to join the retreat was that they felt the need to take time off for themselves. Many participants had used annual leave to attend the retreat. They viewed the retreat as a chance to get away from work and do something that they can enjoy.

“I think we’re really scared of taking time off for yourself...I was quite happy to take time off because this is for me...you work long hours...it was a pleasure to take it off”

Participants found out about the retreat on social media, through the forest mailing list and advertisements or by browsing for local activities on Eventbrite.

Experiences of taking part

The retreat was a positive experience for participants, with each individual enjoying both the yoga and forest bathing sessions. While many participants had done yoga or forest bathing before, it was the first time for most doing yoga in a forest or outdoor environment, and they appreciated the unique atmosphere. Of particular focus was the sensory experience when undertaking these activities. Participants felt that being in the forest setting allowed them to tune into their different senses more easily. This is something they appreciated and felt is “more purposeful” and “how it is supposed to be”.

“I could become stellar. I could smell the trees and it definitely hit far more senses and appreciate them. Life at the moment, everything is at 100mph, and we never stop to just look at where we are and what we’re doing”

Participants also mentioned that these mindful activities allowed them to “see things from a different perspective”. They were able to notice the fine details in nature that they would normally miss. In a similar way, one individual appreciated that when looking up during the yoga session, they were able to see the blue sky, rather than a ceiling, which helped them to feel more “in the moment”.

In terms of ‘The Glade’ area that has been developed; participants had mixed opinions. One participant “missed” the tree-top walkway that The Glade replaced. They felt that the openness of The Glade felt “unnatural” and preferred forest environments to have an enclosed feel. Others had more favourable views, mentioning that they intend to come back to The Glade as it becomes more established and to watch it change throughout the seasons. All participants appreciated the biodiversity in The Glade area, mentioning elements such as plants and the different fungi growing there.

Benefits of doing this activity in the forest environment

Participants identified benefits of taking part in the activities within the forest environment. There were perceived psychological benefits from their involvement, where they noticed affective changes. The activities made them feel peaceful and relaxed, which helped them to escape the burdens and fast pace of everyday life. One participant additionally described such activities as beneficial for their mental

health and went on to express how they perceive such activities in nature to have potential use in the treatment of mental health conditions.

“I think it [the activities] should be prescribed to everyone before they hand out anti-depressants”

For one participant, the yoga session was an emotional experience, in which they found they spent time reflecting on themselves. They did, however, find that taking part in the forest bathing afterwards allowed them to shift their attention away from themselves and on to nature instead, demonstrating one potential benefit of combining these activities. This participant also found the yoga physically challenging, noting that she would feel the effects of it the following day.

Activity levels after taking part

Participants viewed both activities as “gentle” or “mindful” exercises, which complimented each other. For example, one participant noticed that after being prompted to think about their breathing during the yoga session, they were more aware of their breathing during the forest bathing session, suggesting a potential transfer of skills from one activity to another.

Participants also mentioned that after the retreat, they were likely to carry out both activities again (both alone or as part of guided sessions). This was particularly the case for one participant who felt that the retreat equipped them with the necessary experience to do the activities again by themselves.

“I think now that I’ve got over the hurdle of the first, because it’s of the unknown...you know what to expect, you’re better prepared”

Furthermore, participants said that they would now come back to the forest to try different activities. For example, one participant said they now intend to bring their children to the forest to walk.

However, one participant noted that, although they would like to come back to do similar activities, they find it difficult trying to fit them in with work, and so would appreciate evening or weekend sessions. Additionally, some felt they would probably feel unsafe or vulnerable visiting alone in the dark and would feel more comfortable visiting at this time with the activity leaders or in a group.

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More information about the monitoring and evaluation of the Active Forests programme, including additional case studies, is available at

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

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