



Cloghleagh Forest and Shankill River, Co Wicklow. Photograph: Peter Gaynor

Forest therapy: reconnecting with nature

Step into a forest for your health and well-being, writes **Shirley Gleeson**.

The work of the Native Woodland Trust in preserving Ireland's ancient forests is of the utmost importance. It is vital not just for a healthy ecosystem but also for the health of the people of Ireland.

In the past, trees and native woodlands have featured prominently in our heritage, poetry and literature. In ancient times, the spiritual value of trees was recognised with designated sacred trees, rag trees and Mass bushes.

In recent years this deep connection between man and nature has become fractured. Ecopsychologists such as Theodore Roszak and David Abram have argued that this disconnection has contributed to a rise in mental health

difficulties within society; that the health of the planet and its people are interlinked. The **Biophilia Hypothesis** suggests that people have an innate connection with nature and, when this is severed, their well-being suffers.

The Heritage Council's recent report *Children and the Outdoors* has confirmed a rapid decline in children spending time outdoors in Ireland. This is paralleled with increased urbanisation and technology use. This is concerning, as research has demonstrated that pro-environmental behaviour is linked with nature connectedness developed during childhood. We protect the things we



love. If children are not getting the opportunity to play in our magical forests, how can we expect them to grow up and advocate for and protect our native woodlands?

Over the past 20 years, a strong research evidence base has emerged confirming the physical, psychological, social and spiritual health and well-being benefits of spending time in forests. These include reducing blood pressure, heart rate, stress and anxiety, as well as improving mood, concentration, sleep and recovery time after surgery.

Natural outdoor areas and natural elements such as forests, parks and trees provide opportunities to enhance public health and well-being. Forests are seen as restorative environments and play a vital role in promoting health and well-being in a stressful world.

Studies have shown that the greater the biodiversity in nature, the greater



Galway. This study's findings demonstrated the feasibility, and tested the efficacy, of a forest therapy intervention for adults who were experiencing stress. The intervention reduced stress and improved wellbeing among a small sample of participants.

Nature does the healing

Forest therapy, as it is known in the United States, or *shinrin-yoku*, as it is described in Japan (meaning forest bathing), is gaining international recognition as a form of health-restoring recreation in which nature does the healing. People are encouraged to connect to their five senses through sensory connection invitations and mindfulness activities in a forest setting.

A typical walk lasts about three hours and people are introduced to the wonders, beauty and peace of the forest ecosystem. The pace is very gentle, which encourages people to slow down and to come out of their heads and into their bodies.

People are supported to connect with nature by listening to the rustling of the leaves and the sound of the birds; identifying and familiarising with the flora and fauna of the forest; smelling the scent of the trees and sap; witnessing the light dancing through the leaves; and touching various woodland textures such as mosses, bark, lichens, fungi, leaves and needles. The forest therapy guide emphasises the interdependent and symbiotic nature of the forest. The sense of interconnectedness that people experience can be spiritual in nature.

Last year, I was part of a training team from the **Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs**, who trained people from all over Europe in the practice of forest therapy. The training took place in **Crann Óg Eco Farm** in Drummin Wood, Gort, Co Galway.

In Japan, forest therapy is well established, with forty-eight designated forest therapy centres, which develop forest therapy trails. Medical practitioners prescribe time in these forests for a number of health problems. The Korean Forest Service operates a forest welfare system which is 'cradle to grave' in its scope, offering forest kindergarten, forest healing centres and forest burials as part of their services.

In Ireland, **Coillte** is doing exceptional work in highlighting the importance of the connection between forests and health and well-being. Coillte has joined forces with the **Health Service**

Executive, Mental Health Ireland and **See Change** to promote the **Green Ribbon** campaign to raise awareness about mental health. They have also run the very successful **Woodlands for Health** project, which is a twelve-week programme for adults experiencing mental health difficulties, prescribed by mental health professionals, run in Wicklow and Dublin.

Nature, Health and Well-being Ireland, which I founded, runs regular forest therapy walks in Dublin and Wicklow, delivers workshops and conducts and disseminates research on the health benefits of nature contact.

Diarmuid McAree, former chief forestry inspector of the Forest Service, is our forestry consultant and advisor. He is actively working with the United Nations' team of specialists on green jobs in the forestry sector (based in Geneva) and is hoping to develop green jobs in the area of forests and health. Creating sustainable jobs that focus on the non-timber benefits of forests is a priority.

This is a very exciting time for nature and health research. We have always known the therapeutic benefits of walking in the woods, how it lifts our spirits and refreshes our tired souls. However, for some reason, we have begun to stray away from spending time in nature. This is at enormous cost to our health and well-being, but also the health and well-being of our forests.

Medical practitioners in Ireland are starting to pay attention to this vital area and it is my hope that nature-based interventions become part of the health service. Instead of prescribing anti-depressants for mild and moderate depression, general practitioners can write green prescriptions, prescribing physical activity in nature, which is equally as effective, according to the UK body, the **National Institute for Health and Care Excellence**. We are still a long way off nature-based interventions becoming mainstream, but the process has started in Australia, New Zealand and our very own Donegal.

▶ **Shirley Gleeson** is founder of **Nature, Health and Well-being Ireland** – see www.naturehealthandwellbeing.ie for more information. She also works as a senior social worker in adult mental health and is a certified forest therapy guide and mentor with the **Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs** – see www.natureandforesttherapy.org. Shirley can be contacted at shirley_gleeson@hotmail.com ■

the restorative potential. The presence of water, a natural soundscape and the feeling of 'getting away' from everyday life aids in the restoration of attention and concentration (**Attention Restoration Theory**).

Projects such as **NHS Forest, Nature4Health** and **The Mersey Forest** are developing the foundations of a Natural Health Service in the United Kingdom. Their aim is to integrate nature-based activities such as health walks, mindful contact with nature, and conservation work into the health service.

I have just returned from the **International Conference on Landscape and Human Health, Forests, Parks and Green Care**, held in Vienna, Austria, in May, where researchers and practitioners from all over the world presented their work on the relationship between nature, health and well-being. The main focus was on forests and their potential for population health.

I was privileged to have the opportunity to present my forest therapy research, which I conducted for a Master's degree in health promotion at the National University of Ireland,