The wellness economy continues to shape every lifestyle industry, from retail to food and drink, and now experts are directing our attention to nature for the healthiest and most accessible preventative therapies. Nature immersion is the new preferred treatment prescribed by doctors for patients suffering from anxiety, depression and high blood pressure.

In October 2018, the National Health Service (NHS) in Shetland, Scotland, authorized doctors to prescribe nature to patients in the form of hiking and birdwatching. In the United States, 63 healthcare providers in Washington state and 12 in Oregon have started to “prescribe parks” in collaboration with Park Rx America, a non-profit which launched in 2013 and connects patients to the nearest green spot. A 2019 study published in the International Journal of Environmental Health Research reveals that spending 20 minutes in a park improves wellbeing and “life satisfaction.”

In summer 2019, the Woodland Trust UK conservation charity suggested that forest bathing should be recommended by doctors to support patients’ wellbeing. Forest bathing, also known as shinrin-yoku—immersion in a forest environment—is a Japanese practice developed in the early 1980s. Studies have shown that it reduces stress, anxiety, depression, bolsters the immune system and improves cardiovascular health.
Forest therapy in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. Led by Urban Edge
Shinrin-yoku is being adopted by certified practices in the West. Nancy Kopans, founder of Urban Edge Forest Therapy, leads guided walks around New York City, including Central Park. “We’re constantly on the go, especially in a city like New York. Forest therapy is a chance to quieten the mind through a guided walk in nature,” Kopans tells JWT Intelligence.

A typical forest therapy session lasts two to three hours, covers less than a mile, and engages all of people’s senses, deepening connections with themselves, with nature and with their peers. Kopans explains that the guides are facilitators and the forest is the therapist. “It is a deep wellness practice that is very accessible, and there are therapeutic benefits.”

In the UK, Gary Evans, director of The Forest Bathing Institute, introduced Forest Bathing+ in 2016, combining traditional forest bathing techniques with mindful exercises such as meditation and breathing exercises. “An increase in mindfulness—people doing more yoga, people focusing on relaxing—has opened the doorway for forest bathing in the West,” Evans tells JWT Intelligence.
Early adopters, he says, were women who had already experienced yoga and mindfulness practices. “Now we see more men, people after natural healing and people trying to treat stress.” The Forest Bathing Institute is working on grounding Forest Bathing+ in science. The founders are collaborating with the University of Derby on a study that defines its benefits, aiming to release results in 2020. “Our long-term goal is to have the NHS in England prescribe forest bathing like they do in Japan,” says Evans.

According to a 2018 study by the United Nations, 55% of the world’s population already lives in urban areas and this figure is likely to rise to 68% by 2050. Seeking respite from the concrete jungle is becoming a necessary preventative health treatment for today’s wellness-first consumers. Ecotherapy is fast becoming a way to manage stress and anxiety, with doctors and studies increasingly backing nature immersion. “I think of this as medicine for our times,” says Kopans.

**Ecotherapy**

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