

The Power of Forests to Heal the Mind and Body



A Chizu forest therapy guide with a tour party

***Shinrin-yoku* originated in Japan but in recent years has been attracting attention around the world. The mostly forested area of Chizu in Tottori Prefecture runs a *shinrin-yoku* program that offers participants a mind and body healing experience through forests.**

MAO FUJITA

OVER 67% of Japan's land area is covered with forests. These lush forests have provided a variety of benefits, including biodiversity conservation, forest products such as timber and mushrooms, and water purification. More recently, forests have been attracting attention for a rather different function: their positive impact on the human mind and body. *Shinrin-yoku* was first advocated by the Forestry Agency in 1982. In the same year, Japan's first *shinrin-yoku* event was held in Akasawa Natural Recreational Forest in Agematsu, Nagano Prefecture. In verification experiments conducted by the Forestry Agency in the 2000s, spending time in forests was scientifically proven to activate natural killer cells, which are said both to eliminate cancer cells and virus-infected cells, and reduce stress hormones. Volatile compounds called "phytoncides" emitted from trees are

All photos; Courtesy of Chizu Town

said to play a part in this effect.

Based on the findings of these studies, the Forestry Agency developed the Forest Therapy Base scheme to provide facilities where people can experience the preventive medical benefits of *shinrin-yoku* backed up by scientific evidence. In 2006, six forests were designated as forest therapy bases that met conditions such as having more than two Forest Therapy Roads, equipped with benches, toilets and rest stops, as well as offering programs for health promotion and relaxation. Today, sixty-four forests have been recognized under the scheme.

One such forest is that from which the water that nurtures the Tottori Sand Dunes originates in Chizu, Tottori Prefecture, which was designated as a forest therapy base in 2011. Situated some two hours by train from Osaka, Chizu has had a thriving forestry industry since the Edo period (1603-1867), with 93% of its area covered by mixed coniferous forest including cedar and cypress, as well as a wide variety of edible wild plants. The town has a population of over 7,000, and recent years have seen large numbers of people, both men and women of all ages, come here to experience forest therapy.

In 2008, Chizu Town established a Committee of 100 to reflect the voices of its residents in municipal government, in response to the gradual loss of

vitality that accompanied the slump in the domestic forestry industry.

“The idea of shinrin-yoku was proposed when the topic of revitalizing the town using local resources through interaction with residents of urban communities and the younger generation was raised at the Committee of 100. It started out as a forest therapy concept,” says Akihiro Yamanaka of the Chizu Town Hall Rural Regeneration Section.

Chizu Town conducted surveys and studies in preparation for the establishment of a forest therapy base, while at the same time fine tuning the planning of tour programs and the design of training courses for forest guides. Forest therapy commenced in 2011, and as of July 2019, there are around eighty Chizu forest therapy guides. However, applications to become Chizu guides are also being received from non-residents of the town.

The Ashizu Valley, a popular Therapy Road in Chizu, is a mixed coniferous forest and boasting one of the best mountain streams in Japan, making it beautiful in all seasons. For that reason, a forest therapy program for corporate training is offered there. The program aims to relieve the pressure and stress experienced by new employees and middle managers through forest therapy.

“We have made an app that measures participants’ emotional balance. We also encourage participants to experience forest therapy in urban parks near their homes before and after the therapy in Chizu. In these ways, participants can appreciate the effects of the forest even when they are not in Chizu. Local inhabitants have told us it was heartening to see participants, many of whom do not look happy at the start of the tour, go home with smiles on their faces after completing the program,” says Chizu Town Hall Rural Regeneration Section Manager Susumu Yamamoto.

Companies that have introduced this training program report psychological improvement, saying that participants appeared more cheerful and became more proactive after the training.

In recent years, shinrin-yoku originating in Japan has attracted attention around the world. In the



1



2



3

- 1 Spending time in forests reduces stress hormones
- 2 Meditating in the forest. A number of Forest Therapy Bases offer programs for health promotion and relaxation
- 3 Company employees on a forest therapy training program

United States and Europe, books presenting the results of Japanese studies have been published and the concept has received newspaper, television and other media coverage. Perhaps you too might like to try taking a deep breath embraced by a magnificent forest like Chizu? 