High Country News
FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

Forest therapy for wildfire survivors

Spending time in the woods can help wildfire survivors recover.

***Rebecca Randall**, November 1, 2024*

Chico, California, resident Jessie Raeder dug her fingers into the dirt. Before she arrived, she'd been in a "state of clenching," she said, but this forest therapy walk in the Butte Creek Ecological Reserve left her feeling calmer. The sessions were intended to support locals like Raeder, who live in areas that have burned in wildfires. The guide invited her and the other participants to feel nearby textures — perhaps the roughness of bark, wet grass, or the smoothness of a rock. Raeder held dirt in her hands and noted its earthy aroma. "For me, it was definitely a familiar and welcome smell of childhood," she said. "These sessions were very soothing and grounding and left me feeling refreshed and enlivened."

Tracing back to the 1980s, doctors in Japan began prescribing *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing, as a way for patients to listen, breathe and simply be in nature. Their studies found benefits, such as lower blood pressure and improved immune system function, which they posit is the result of exposure to phytochemicals found in coniferous forests. It can also help regulate mood and stress. With the increasing intensity and frequency of climate-related natural disasters, more people across the country have experienced trauma and loss. Forest therapy, which invites people to connect with nature, could be a tool to help survivors recover, especially those who live and work in ecosystems adapted to and reliant on seasonal fires. It may be especially beneficial in addressing the broken human-nature relationships that have disrupted this cycle and left many afraid of fire.

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SOCIAL WORKER KATE SCOWSMITH managed cases for survivors of the 2018 Camp Fire, the most destructive fire in California history. She also lost her home in the fire. She said many of her clients have expressed trepidation about spending time near the forest. One client whose house burned down didn't want to move into her new home, even though trees were sparse in the area. "She's like, 'I can't move there. The trees tried to kill me,'" said Scowsmith. Eli Goodsell, the executive director of Chico State Ecological Reserves, also noticed residents' trauma responses to being around the forest. He happened to learn about forest therapy mere weeks before the Camp Fire, and he saw a need to create outdoor experiences that could help people regain their love for where they lived. He pursued a grant from a local foundation so that social workers like Scowsmith, as well as psychotherapists and community leaders, could be trained as forest therapy guides by the Association for Nature and Forest Therapy (ANFT).

In 2021, the group began offering the community free guided walks. The walks follow a model: Guides lead groups of around a dozen, prompting them with open-ended questions. *What do you see, smell, hear? What's in motion around you?* Perhaps one person examines a ladybug on a leaf, looks up at the trees, or simply notices their thoughts in motion, said Scowsmith and Blake

Ellis, the Chico program's manager. The guides invite people to share their thoughts and move as they please; they can sit on rocks or explore new paths. Events cater to a range of abilities and comfort levels, with locations ranging from city parks with paved trails and restrooms to less-developed trails within the eco-reserve. Each guided walk ends with wild teas and refreshments. The ANFT model focuses on reminding us that we are a part of nature, said Ellis. This relationship is foundational to being a human, "just like the relationship you have with your loved ones." Initially, Scowsmith thought of forest therapy as a tool she could offer fellow survivors, but it helped her recover, too, and decide what she wanted her life to look like after the fire. Ultimately, it led her to have a baby and buy a house near her parents' house in the nearby community of Magalia, which lost about a third of its homes in the Camp Fire.

Now beginning its fourth year, the program has provided nearly 6,000 forest therapy experiences to community members in Butte County, and participants say they feel better after.

Kate Scowsmith, who lost her home in the Camp Fire and is now a trained ecotherapist, poses for a portrait in Paradise, California. ***Andri Tambunan***

In 322 surveys collected between October 2022 and June 2024, 92% of participants agreed that they felt more connected to nature afterward, while 87% felt less stressed, and 85% were less anxious. In anonymous feedback, one participant wrote: "I've been in therapy for a while, and today's (forest) therapy session was the best one I've had in years."

But other data has been more difficult to gather. For example, it's still unclear how many of the participants are wildfire survivors; most answered "would rather not share" when asked if they'd been impacted by the recent megafires. "People struggle with how you define the word impact," said Scowsmith. Some impacts, like losing your home, might seem obvious. But others might be more subtle — a yard burning in a fire, say, or letting a friend who lost their home park an RV in your driveway for six months.

According to a 2023 study of Chico's program led by University of Washington researchers, forest therapy could help communities with limited mental health services. Other communities are trying it, said Manuela Siegfried, training coordinator for the ANFT; the organization collaborated with the U.S. Forest Service to train the first bilingual cohort in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria. Ellis is consulting with guides in Hawai'i, who are offering the practice to Maui residents following the 2023 wildfires.

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Forest therapy isn't just a disaster response, Ellis said. As megafires increasingly impact communities, finding ways to adjust our reaction becomes a form of climate adaptation.

In addition to grants, the program has sought more sustainable funding by contracting with Paradise Recreation and Parks District and other public agencies that offer wellness services, such as local schools. But beyond this program,

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Goodsell also envisions forest therapy becoming a critical part of workforce resiliency for agencies like the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, the Forest Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

This fall, a grant from the California Fire Foundation will support ecotherapy walks alongside prescribed burns, addressing the community's mental triggers, such as smoky skies and blackened landscapes. "We need to be able to see these landscapes through a different lens," said Ellis. "Otherwise, they're just a constant reminder of our trauma and loss."

For Raeder, who now regularly attends forest walks, it's an opportunity to reconnect with nature. She attended a session in the aftermath of the Camp Fire. "You would see dead trees, but you could also see it springing back to life," she said. "It was good to spend time on it, see the reality of it, but also see plants coming back, birds coming back in dead trees."

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