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Forest bathing as a mindful tourism practice

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

In the troubled times in which we currently live, the tourism industry has called into question a need for more responsible social practices and more mindful utilisation of natural environments. The Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing, has not only become a new wellness trend, but also a great potential for deeply immersive tourist experiences. While there is a wealth of studies examining the positive effects of forest bathing focussing principally on its medical benefits, this qualitative study extends these debates through documenting lived experiences of forest bathers. In so doing forest bathing suggests its latent potential to offer a profoundly mindful experience, and aims to situate this practice more prominently within the tourism discourse.

1. Introduction

The recognition that tourism can improve personal wellbeing lies behind its adoption as one of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2020). It can in many ways help the inner journey of change, and promote responsibility, (self)care and readiness for transformative moments. More recently, tourism researchers have started to more forcefully advocate for the awakening of human consciousness, a shifting of values and finding happiness and fulfilment in tourism practices. Sheldon (2020, p. 8), for example, highlights mindfulness in particular as a "fertile ground for transformation" while the process of slowing down the pace of travel is viewed as a facilitator of wellbeing, positive experiences and spiritual awakening. This is particularly welcome in the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to greater concerns around personal health and wellbeing. It prompted rethinking people's relationship with the natural environment and the ways in which we utilise natural spaces. In the current Anthropause (Rutz et al., 2020), what have been increasingly sought are solace and more than human companionship, particularly in natural environments. The pause, however, has allowed space for slowing down and taking time to reflect, as well as for epistemic opportunities (Searle et al., 2021): to learn more about the ways in which humans can interact with nature and utilise green spaces for wellbeing, inner growth or spiritual transformation.

To address the negative effects of the digitalised life and pandemic, prescriptions to take short, restorative trips into areas rich in nature have become a leading wellness trend (Global Wellness Summit, 2019). Forest ecosystems in particular have been suggested as a non-pharmacological therapeutic medium, with forest therapy being a leading trend in the fields of preventive and complementary medicine (Koselka et al., 2019). Forests' non-timber products offer opportunities for more diverse experiences, particularly those centred on the improvement of people's wellbeing and quality of life (Forest Europe, 2020). For example, the construction and maintenance of forest trails has greatly increased access to 'wilder' areas, offering opportunities for enjoyment in 'calm spaces', viewing platforms or sensory gardens (Pawar & Rothkar, 2015). Such provisions are not only aimed at achieving more mindful utilisation of forest resources but also enabling extended time for visitors to recuperate whilst breathing in the forest air.

Likewise, tourists seek products, services and experiences aimed at improving their holistic wellbeing (Dillette, Douglas, & Andrzejewski, 2021; Thal, Smith, & George, 2021). In response to this, innovative therapeutical programmes based on alternative medicine, ecotherapy, forest wellness and forest therapy, represent a new service in wellness tourism. One such trend is forest bathing (*shinrin-yoku)*, spearheaded by Japanese researchers.,. They have advocated the immersive forest experience, which, in essence, aims to re-connect people with the land and activate the senses, allowing for multisensory, affective and kinaesthetic processes. However, despite this practice being originally conceptualised as "a short, mindful visit to a forest" (Li, 2018, p.12), mindfulness has been somewhat marginalised in academic discussions on forest bathing, in favour of its psychometric and physiological

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benefits. Moreover, the empirical research on more profound, intimate, even spiritual values that forests hold has also been less considered among forest bathing scholarship.

More effective use of forests for tourism and wellbeing purposes has gained prominence among Nordic scholars (Komppula & Konu, 2017; Komppula, Konu, & Vikman, 2017; Konu, 2015). Their studies have brought invaluable insights into constructing and offering forest-based wellbeing experiences for tourists. Such tourism product "may include physical activities and relaxation/stress relief in the forest, utilisation of the natural resources of the forests (e.g. berries for food and materials for handicrafts) and also learning activities related to how to use natural resources for wellbeing purposes" (Konu, 2015, p. 6). Although these studies have explored various factors that contribute to tourists' welfare, they were not concerned specifically with forest bathing as a guided, structured activity. To date, the study by Ohe, Ikei, Song, and Miyazaki (2017) is the only one that measured the psychological and physiological relaxation effects of this practice within the rural tourism context. In advancing these conversations, this paper explores the ways in which humans construct the forest-based wellbeing experience during guided forest bathing walks. In so doing, it aims to create space in tourism scholarship to discuss forest bathing as a mindful tourism practice that allows opportunities for mental and physical restoration of the tourist, ultimately contributing to their overall wellbeing and quality of life.

The paper begins by discussing *shinrin-yoku* as a guided practice in the broader forest therapy and forest-based wellbeing tourism contexts whilst positioning the study within the Serbian geographical context. This is followed by knitting together the concepts of forest bathing, forest-based wellbeing and mindfulness, to situate this practice more prominently within the tourism discourse. The ensuing section explains the methodological approach to deepening our understanding of tourists' lived experiences of this practice. The interpretation of our findings suggests how mindfulness emerged as a concept through which we could better understand the construction of the experience during the situated encounter with the forest. In the final section we discuss how our understanding of the effects of forest bathing as a mindful tourism practice may help us to better understand, theorise and develop forest-based wellbeing tourism.

1.1. Forest bathing as a therapeutical concept and sensory practice

In Japan, the belief in the healing powers of forests is influenced by the Shinto religion, which holds that trees have spirits which live within them. Although this intimate and sacred Japanese relationship with forests and the innate knowledge of their healing powers dates back to antiquity, the concept of forest bathing is relatively nascent. It was coined in 1982 by the Japanese Forestry Agency, with the aim of combining forest visits with health and wellbeing-oriented tourism (Clifford, 2018). Shinrin-yoku was subsequently established as a national health programme to encourage people to more frequently escape urban agglomerations and 'bathe' in the forest air (Ramanan, 2019). This initiative was part of the broader campaign to protect the forests, whereby people were guided and encouraged to be mindful of both natural resources and their effects on human health and wellbeing.

In recent years the therapeutic benefits of forest bathing have entered a more mainstream consciousness. It has become a fully recognised healthful pursuit and one of the leading global wellness and spa trends (Global Wellness Summit, 2019). The foundation of associations worldwide that specialise in nature and forest therapy has seen a significant growth, with the American Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs (Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs, 2020) and the Japanese International Society of Nature and Forest Medicine (International Society of Nature and Forest Medicine, 2020) being the leaders in the forest therapy field. Moreover, forest bathing has been incorporated as an integral part of public health programmes in a number of countries, for example in Germany or Scotland, while governments of countries worldwide have been considering it as a restorative practice and a way of addressing the global (post-)pandemic mood.

What makes forest bathing a practice is the structured, embodied and materially mediated nature of forest bathing walks (Rantala, 2010). Clifford (2018), the founder of the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs, suggests several critical elements that characterise forest bathing: movement at slow pace and within a short distance, focus on the senses and connection with the more-than-human world. This practice, however, can take different forms of immersion: from merely being in and soaking up the forest atmosphere whilst anchoring the mind in the present, to actively engaging in therapeutic and relaxation activities, termed by Clifford (2018) as 'invitations'. They can be as diverse as active imagination and visualisation techniques, aromatherapy, bibliotherapy, acoustic massage or gong baths, the experience of which is normally augmented by a certified forest therapy guide. While the Japanese five senses model emphasises the scientific rationale for forest walks, as will be discussed in more depth in the ensuing section, the approach suggested by the American Association (Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs, 2020) differs in that it moves beyond the five senses model, to include activities which require mindful awareness such as body awareness, the body radar, proprioception or imaginal communication. To mediate the experience during forest bathing sessions, the guides actively emphasise slowness and continual attention to the senses whilst deemphasising the factual information. In so doing, they allow the attention to be shifted from learning about what something in the forest *is* to how something in the forest makes one *feel*.

Serbian forest bathing forms the substantive focus of this study. In 2012, the MSPAAS (2020) put forward 'forest hammams' as the new Balkan spa concept, which has been further developed and operationalised through its regional association Forest Therapy South Eastern Europe since 2019 (Forest Therapy South Eastern Europe, 2020). The analogy comes from the recognition that the forests of the Balkans are for the most part bright and the sun's rays pass through the treetops, much like they pass through openings (the so called 'elephant eyes') on the roofs of authentic *hammams* (Turkish baths) thus illuminating the *hararet*, the central place of the hammam in which the programme takes place (MSPAAS, 2020). Learning primarily from Finnish, American and Japanese approaches to developing tourism based on forests, the Forest Therapy South Eastern Europe (2020) has started to utilise regional forests for wellbeing tourism purposes, through educating and certifying local guides as 'mediators of forest medicine' and the inclusion of forest bathing to diversify the tourism offer of destinations.

While the core idea of forest bathing revolves around improving people's wellbeing, guided forest walks are delivered in a slightly different way in each geographical region, each bringing what is unique to them. For example, whilst foraging or berry picking are an integral part of the Finnish forest walks (Saimaalife, 2020), Serbian forest bathing products incorporate the elements of healing views of pastures at the edge of forests with the relaxing sound of sheep bells, 'wollala' wellness (scrubs with sheep wool) or collecting medieval medicinal herbs. Therefore, apart from promoting the values of forests, efforts have been centred on sustainable tourism activities and incorporation of traditional cultural assets of the region into these products. Through encouraging the involvement of local communities to create and deliver forest-based wellbeing experiences, further attempts have been made to situate forest bathing within the national tourism development strategy.

1.2. Intersecting forest bathing and forest-based wellbeing tourism

The benefits of nature and green areas for well-being have been widely researched across diverse disciplinary fields (Henderson & Potter, 2001; Iwata et al., 2016; Keniger, Gaston, Irvine, & Fuller, 2013; Kim, Lim, Chung, & Woo, 2009; Korpela, Borodulin, Neuvonen, Paronen, & Tyrväinen, 2014; Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St Leger, 2006; Marselle, Irvine, & Warber, 2013; Ojala, Korpela, Tyrväinen, Tiittanen, & Lanki, 2019; Simkin, Ojala, & Tyrväinen, 2020; Tyrväinen et al., 2014). However, the health and wellbeing effects of forests in particular have been more substantially researched in countries rich in forests, or where they play a great part in the everyday lives of locals, such as Japan or Finland (Hansen, Jones, & Tocchini, 2017; Karjalainen, Sarjala, & Raitio, 2009; Li, 2018; Tsunetsugu, Park, & Miyazaki, 2010). Furthermore, scholars researching the wellbeing effects of forests have made significant contributions to the tourism research agenda (Konu, 2015; Konu & Laukkanen, 2010; Rantala & Puhakka, 2020). Despite the great efforts that researchers have made to explore the positive effects that spending time in arboreal environments has on human health, forest-based wellbeing tourism longs for novel understandings of the human experience, particularly emanating from immersion in the forest atmosphere during forest bathing walks.

Forest bathing as a structured, mediated practice is considered to be one of the most accessible ways to reconnect with the natural world. Its therapeutic effects have been widely researched, resulting in a canon of publications, principally within the medical realm. In attempting to firmly anchor this practice in high-stress societies and to fully exploit the therapeutic effects of forests, natural and health scientists have maintained focus on their capacity to increase immunity, provide relaxation and reduce stress. These effects have been thus far investigated principally through the application of quantitative methods designed to ascertain the physiological effects of this practice, albeit rendering valuable insights. Researchers have found that even a short trip into a forest may help our body to boost its immune system, maintain and improve its vital functions and improve both mental and physical health. Breathing in the forest's 'volatile' substances can help to reduce stress or enhance rehabilitation and concentration (Hansen et al., 2017; Park, Tsunetsugu, Kasetani, Kagawa, & Miyazaki, 2010). The phytoncides, aromatic molecules released by trees, prompt our bodies to boost the natural killer (NK) cells that attack infections and guard against tumours (Li, 2010; Li et al., 2006). It has been argued that forest bathing can prevent illnesses caused by stress, burn-out and depression, as well as help to establish personal and community identity, social activity, and social participation (Morton, Ferguson, & Baty, 2015). While these studies have been mainly published within the environmental and public health realm, little attempt has been made to extend research into the tourism context. The work of Ohe et al. (2017) is a notable exception, illustrating the potential of forest bathing to contribute to tourism development in rural environments through offering opportunities for relaxation.

Great contributions to our understanding of forest-based wellbeing, however, have been made by Nordic tourism scholars (Hjalager & Flagestad, 2012; Komppula et al., 2017; Komppula & Konu, 2017; Konu, 2015; Rantala & Puhakka, 2020). Konu's (2015) conceptualisation of forest-based wellbeing tourism suggests a practice of consuming natural resources with healing powers, as well as providing tourists with pleasurable, comfortable and luxurious experiences. What is luxurious in this context are the embodied dimensions of being temporarily immersed in the arboreal environment, with the healing soundscape highlighted as a critical quality of the forest experience. Attending to the senses, Komppula et al. (2017) are particularly concerned with the significance of silence for those who live in hectic environments. They observe silence as a 'commodity' which is considered to be a luxury in modern, hyper-technological societies. The renewing and deepening connections of the more-than-human world therefore act as a restorative for stressful urban everydayness. An emphasis is also placed on tourists' comfort, and the opportunity to relax, listen and hear more clearly in a quiet, slow-paced environment. The authors claim that a forest activity is likely to be healing when it makes room for listening, for quiet and accepting presence, and for inquiry through sensorial engagement in mindful and deeply insightful ways.

Discussing positive benefits of tourism more broadly, Sheldon (2020) opines that inner calm, wellbeing and meaningfulness may be achieved through slow-paced journeys. Slow movement cherishes deep, mindful experiences that unravel through extended immersion into the immediate landscapes. In increasing one's awareness of the surroundings, it tends to allow for deeper and stronger connections between tourists and the natural and social environment. In this vein Farkić, Filep, and Taylor (2020) have taken the positive psychology approach to the interrogation of tourist wellbeing that have rendered invaluable insights into the hedonic and eudaimonic qualities of slow journeys, of which flourishing, attention, openness and pleasure are an integral part. Similarly, mediated forest bathing experience may stimulate reflective practices through spending kairological (qualitative and meaningful) time in nature to increase tourists' attention, openness, mindfulness or spiritual awakening. Similar to Konu's (2015) proposition, these authors also suggest that slowness "offers consumers the luxurious commodity of taking time to dwell in nature, being more mindful and developing a connection with their environment" (Farkić et al., 2020, p. 2067). In guided slow adventure scenarios space is allowed for disconnection from the stressful and disturbing stimuli by which the modern world is overly saturated. To that end, luxury is viewed as something unquantifiable, permeated by qualities such as slowness, security, silence and stillness. Such understanding of luxury in many ways differs from the capitalist, consumerist ideas of luxury as possession, status or prestige (Berry, 1994). Instead, it is focused on the meaningfulness of immersion and the simplicity of *being* in wild nature or a forest setting; it is the passage of time which is perceived differently within 'nature's timeframe' (Varley, Huijbens, Taylor, & Laven, 2020). Such qualities, which are greatly valued in modern, western societies, are claimed to have profound therapeutic powers.

Rantala's (2010) study on the practices of guides and tourists in forest through Gibson's (1986) theory of affordance is also of relevance here. The perception of affordances may be translated into an awareness of the self and the environment, as well as what the forest allows for and restricts. While tourists are attuned to the affordances of the forest, spontaneous attention may be granted to its unexpected elements and surprises. The meaningfulness of the forest bathing experience may therefore be achieved through the mindful immersion into the forest and knowing how to read its affordances; the relational aspect of this process plays a vital role in the construction of meaning. Hence, the guide's facilitation of movement at slow pace while tourists are breathing in the forest air and experiencing forest affordances may deepen human connection with the self, the forest, and others in the forest.

1.3. Mindfulness

It is here where we begin to appreciate the concept of mindfulness as a productive way of understanding what happens during guided forest bathing walks. Its foundations, as observed through Zen Buddhism, include observations of the body, the feelings, the mind, and objects of the mind (Wang, Chen, Shi, & Shi, 2020). Mindfulness has been historically utilised as a means of cultivating wellbeing through practices such as meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, body scanning or mindful walks (Levine, 2011). Building on these traditions, more recent wellness paradigm promotes activities aimed at personal and spiritual growth, mind-body balance, or alternative therapies. Moreover, mindfulness techniques have long been part of the wellness and spa service portfolios (Lehto, Brown, Chen, & Morrison, 2006). What is common for all of them is the focused attention which keeps one anchored in the 'here and now' which "enhances processing internal (proprioceptive, kinaesthetic) and external (visual, auditory/vestibular) cues" that contribute towards increased wellbeing (Salmon, Lush, Jablonski, & Sephton, 2009, p.64).

The mindfulness theory suggests that individual's cognitive, affective and behavioural responses occur in a range of social situations (Langer, 1992). Brown and Ryan (2003) broadly define mindfulness as "being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present" (p. 822). It has also been conceptualised as a state practiced in mindfulness meditation and as a trait, in terms of one's tendency to be mindful in everyday life (Kiken, Garland, Bluth, Palsson, & Gaylord, 2015). Bishop et al. (2004), however, propose that mindfulness is a state rather than a trait as it allows us to become more aware of the stream of thoughts and feelings that we experience. For example, an enhanced sensory impact of experiences in nature fostered by mindfulness may strengthen connectedness to nature and better understanding of our reciprocal relationship with it (Howell, Dopko, Passmore, & Buro, 2011).

The concept of mindfulness is not new to tourism scholarship. In fact, it has recently "experienced a renaissance in tourism research" (Stankov, Filimonau, Gretzel, & Vujičić, 2020, p. 239). It has been long perceived as an active state of cognition and attention to the immediate settings, as well as an explanatory concept for tourism experiences (Moscardo, 1996, 2017). What is common in academic discussions is the potential of mindfulness to enhance the tourism experience and positively contribute to social change. An emphasis is inevitably placed on people's presence in the moment and a deep, almost meditative focus on the senses (Lynn, Chen, Scott, & Benckendorff, 2017). The sensory awareness is a fundamental element of mindfulness because "a stream of awareness beginning with sensation leads to the commencement of mental processing in a mindful way" (p. 9). Attention to and activation of the senses leads to the closer engagement and deepening of tourist experiences. For example, common to Lynn et al.'s (2017) and Komppula and Konu's (2017) work is an emphasis on silence. Through quietening, people are more able to distance themselves from their everyday thoughts and engage with what is unfolding in the present moment (Stankov, Filimonau, & Vujičić, 2020). The awareness and acceptance of that 'presentness' and the emotions that are stirred up through mindful engagement with the setting, are considered to be crucial priorities of mindfulness. Therefore, engaging an enhanced level of sensory awareness and relaxed, meditative attention, rather than goal-directed awareness is what adds depth, richness and quality to the tourists' lived experience.

Cautioning that meditation should not be entirely identified with mindfulness in the forest bathing context, Clifford (2018) explains that while meditation celebrates equanimity, thus not prioritising any lived experience, structured forest baths entail the aforementioned dimensions of mindfulness, whilst privileging qualities such as pleasure, awe and delight. Forest bathing, being a mediated sensory experience aimed at activating the dormant senses, suggests that when people feel pleasure and sensual enjoyment during forest walks, they should be mindful of them and invite them in. Therefore, our intention here is to utilise the mindfulness concept to better understand the forest bathing experience. Specifically, we are concerned with the process of the experience construction during people's engagement in diverse invitations in mediated forest bathing walks.

2. Method

In trying to explore the role of the senses in constructing the forest experience, we here answer Konu's (2015) call for using an ethnographic approach in the context of developing a new tourism product. We chose Pink's (2015) sensory ethnography to studying not only the ways in which the senses were engaged, activated and deepened through guided forest bathing walks, but also what the experience meant in the broader context of the participants' wellbeing. Traditional ethnographic research which assumes involvement of the researcher in the research setting for longer periods of time has been recently challenged (Farkić, 2020). Intensive short-term ethnographically-informed research may be equally insightful, as the researcher and participant "come together in sharing the intensities of emotions, somatic knowledges and haptic spaces of encounter" (Pink, 2010, p. 923). To that end, the data were generated in a short research encounter, which we now turn to discuss.

The ethnographic material was collected during and after two guided forest bathing walks organised by the Medical Spa Association of Serbia and Forest Therapy SEE, on the 7th and 8th September 2019. That weekend, more than 90 walks were organised across 22 countries across the world, in celebration of International Forest Bathing Day. The first of these two forest walks took place in the oldest special nature reserve in Serbia, Obedska Bara. The second forest bathing walk was organised a day later in the forest near the village of Jablanica in Central Serbia. The walks, gathering nearly 80 participants across the weekend, sought to promote forest bathing's potential for both rural tourism development and its introduction as a forest wellness/forest medicine programme. The majority of participants travelled to and stayed overnight at the aforementioned locales situated in different parts of Serbia. What united them was a love of nature, forests, local traditions and, above all, a healthy lifestyle, which added to the richness and depth of descriptions and interpretations of their lived experiences. Among the participants there were artists, doctors, foresters, cosmeticians, 'qi gong' students and tourism workers, most of whom had no previous knowledge nor experience of forest bathing. The walks were guided by certified forest therapy guides and were undertaken in the two aforementioned localities. They lasted from 1.5 to 2 h each, during which the participants were required to switch off their mobile phones. The walks were supplemented by lunch breaks and a tea ceremony, as important aspects of the trip for both facilitating socialisation with other attendees and as an expression of gratitude to the forest.

The sensory ethnographic approach is premised on the first author's sustained immersion in the fieldwork setting (Pink, 2015), which allowed her to actively take part in the activities and converse with others. The researcher undertook participant observation during both walks. This method assumed more than just observing; it allowed her to enter the world of others in more embodied ways, with whom social spaces were shared for extended periods of time. This way, insights were gained around processual dimensions of the trips, including travelling, eating, walking, taking part in invitations, the tea ceremony and returning to base. This involved exchanges with other forest bathers, local organisers of the walks and guides of the forest bathing walks, as well as interactions with the more-than-human world. This enabled her to focus on how the social place was constructed both in the experience of participants and in the descriptions that they ultimately created (Pink, 2015). In taking part in the structured walks, the sensory experience was explored, as were its material, sensorial and affective dimensions.

Valtonen, Markuksela and Moisander (2010, p. 378) explain that "multi-sensory observation requires a new kind of analytic orientation that brings to the fore the sensory aspects that commonly go unnoticed". To that end, particular attention was granted to tactile dimensions (the feeling of moss or tree bark under fingers), olfactory (the smell of pine needles) or auditory (the whisper of the leaves) and even to proprioception (the sense of bodily presence). Melding into the group allowed for first-person insights into the encounters between the researcher, participants and the environment, which brought invaluable multilayered knowledge. The researcher took mental notes of her observations, immediately recorded in a field diary after the walks and later expanded into longer narratives. Fourteen pages of her 'jottings' (Valtonen et al., 2010) were later subjected to post-experiential, reflexive analysis. In analytical focus were the interactions and entanglements of participants with the forest and one another, and their practices, performances, bodily movements and sensory experiences.

Conceiving of the interview as a situated social interaction, the researcher's observations were supplemented with informal, unstructured conversations with forest bathing walk attendees (van Enk, 2009). These dialogues, having entirely flexible discursive forms, rendered insights into lived experiences of the others. Following the mobile methods developed by human geographers, the first author engaged in this way of gaining knowledge *in situ* (Evans & Jones, 2011; Kusenbach, 2003). This 'high-engagement' approach was particularly valuable as it allowed the context, both social and environmental, to frame the conversations (Ye, Hughes, Walters, & Mkono, 2020). Familiarisation with participants was an important aspect of recruitment, as it allowed for less formal conversations during the day as well as producing more insightful responses. The interviews with 'strange' participants were conducted only after the researcher grew to know them in person and negotiated the time and space which they found the most appropriate. Furthermore, the dataset was enriched through conducting interviews with certified forest therapy guides before, during and after the forest bathing celebration weekend. All the conversations were recorded and, after transcription, translated from Serbian by the first author. Of the 23 participants that were recruited across the two days, the researcher heard voices of 15 'non-expert' forest walk attendees and 8 forest therapy guides, which brought insights into experiences of forest bathing from different epistemological positions. Some participants chose to be anonymised and their identities are not disclosed. We aim to contextualise the others that consented to be interviewed non-anonymously through briefly providing their positionalities.

Each method brought invaluable insights into people's experiences during the guided forest bathing walks. The sorting and analysis of the data started during the data collection process and were continuously discussed among the three authors. Eventually, thematic analysis was used to interpret the large corpus of data (Walters, 2016). Initially, authors read the accounts several times in order to become familiar with the data and made qualitative distinctions between them. Their readings led to intuitive coding; initially, broad themes emerged, such as health benefits, escape from the everyday and ways of immersion. What was elicited through the further analysis however was participants' attention to the senses and mental and bodily processes, which narrowed down the empirical material we further analysed. Our attention was then shifted to the participants' awareness of what was happening in their minds and bodies during the walks in which the attentive openness towards the present moment was distilled (Tophoff, 2004). Finally, this led to crystallisation of the processes such as active reflection, awareness and focused attention, all inherent in the idea of mindfulness. This enabled our contextual understanding of how forest bathing as a mindful tourist practice contributes to enhancing people's wellbeing (See Fig. 1).

2.1. The construction of the mindful forest bathing experience

Participants came to interact with the arboreal environment through guided forest bathing walks, where the relationality and continual interplay of forest affordancies and the mediation of guides were crucial in constructing their experience. This interaction enabled some of the inherently mindful processes: awareness (mental, physical and emotional), focus (on the senses) or active reflection (on the luxurious moments). These three interconnected dimensions as presented in Fig. 2 assisted us in deepening our understanding of the forest bathing experience, and led us to eventually conceptualise it as a mindful tourism practice.

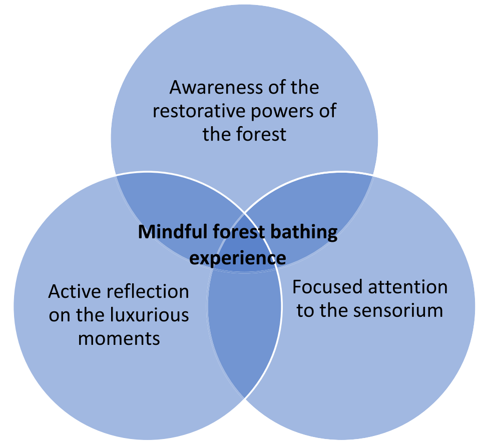

Fig. 2. Conceptualising the experiential nexus of forest bathing.

2.2. Awareness of the restorative powers of the forest

In deepening our understanding of what contributes to tourists' overall wellbeing, we give voice to the participants, focusing on the moments in which they reported heightened awareness of the physical, mental and emotional processes through which they were able to make sense of the restorative powers of forest. For example, in articulating how he felt whilst engaging in diverse invitations, Marko, one of the certified forest therapy guides who was not in his professional role that day, brought together both physical sensations and psychological states into the discussion:

> The forest, nature in general, affects me on multiple levels - it reduces stress and blood pressure, heart rate, deepens the sense of smell, relaxes my eye muscles, my lung capacity increases, the hearing sense sharpens, the sense of touch is more powerful, I feel reborn, relaxed and makes me reluctant to return to the urban areas for a while.

Although Marko initially communicated general 'expert knowledge' relating to the health impacts of forest bathing, he also turned to discussing the ways in which he felt (reborn, restored and relaxed) as well as the outcome of his forest bath (a decreased desire to return to the city). Reducing tension, relaxation and rejuvenation were often mentioned by other participants, as well as aligning these feelings with a sense of liberation and freedom. They were aware that the forest has an emotionally charging effect on bodies, where affective experiences are spatially mediated, as explained by Ivana:

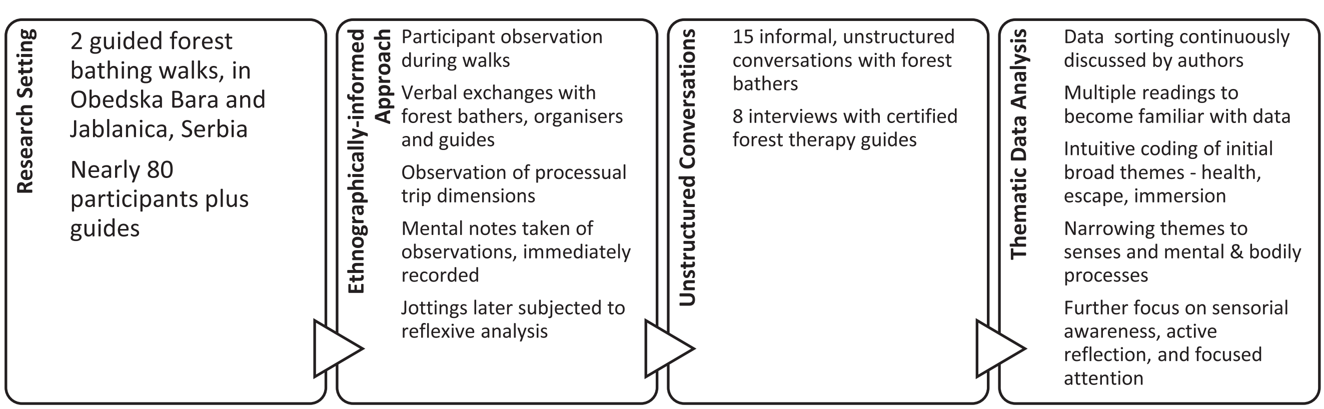

Fig. 1. The methodological process.

> The forest empowers me, relaxes my neck and tension in my shoulders, it makes me happy, gives me strength and will, the feeling of getting wings.

And by another participant:

> The forest has a profound effect on my emotional and mental health. It has a relaxing, deepening impact, it gives me flexibility, a sense of freedom. (M. B.)

Through the strong emotions that they felt, the participants negotiated their embodied experiences and tried to make sense of them. They reported the impacts that the forest had on both their psyche and physique, describing a range of effects, from physical relaxation and reducing tensions accumulated in the body to liberating feelings that rendered them lighter, freer and more alive. The forest also improved their mood and triggered positive emotions, as explained by another forest walk attendee:

> I can feel the freshness of the forest air in my lungs and visualize how that air heals, cleanses and strengthens my lungs and my whole body. […] My emotions are stirred up by spending time in the forest – I feel gratitude, joy, cheerfulness, happiness and a desire to share it all with others. (Ljubica).

Ljubica felt in her body the process of 'healing', the pleasant effects that forest bathing had on her whole being. Through the mindful process of 'visualisation', she was prompted to direct her attention to the effects the forest has on the physical body, but also on her mood. Similar to quantitative studies that reported positive physiological effects of forest bathing (Kim et al., 2009; Tsunetsugu et al., 2010), the restorative experience of lessened anxiety and stress levels were interpreted by the participants:

> At one point, I felt renewed, cured, free from the aggression and anxiety that life in the city imposes on me. (Miroslav).

> My energy at the beginning was at a very low vibration, I was nervous, angry, not interested. As I strolled through the woods, it was soothing both body and soul. I was relieved of stress, my energy returned, I was happy, relaxed and satisfied with myself, but also with everyone else around me. (Dj. C.)

What was happening in their mediated encounter with the forest was being attentive to and aware of what was taking place in their bodies and minds (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Symptoms of dissatisfaction, tension, being stuck or worried were all taken into the forest; they were lessened, however, by spending time in it. Through mindful interactions with what Rantala (2010) refers to as the affordances of the forest, such as sounds, aromatic substances or etheric oils, people's wellbeing may in many ways be restored. This has immense implications for tourism; to offer such opportunity for tourists may be greatly appreciated as in "uncertain times after Covid-19, being slow and mindful might alleviate… anxieties and fears" (Farkić et al., 2020, p. 2076).

2.3. Focused attention to the sensorium

The role of senses and sensory information is crucial for our understanding of the construction of the forest bathing experience (Valtonen et al., 2010). Simultaneously acknowledging the audio-visual hegemony and moving beyond it, we began to realise the role of the senses in the performances and practices of those who participated in the forest bathing walk. Epistemic attention was shifted towards entanglements with the social and material dimensions of the forest, which brought insights into how it was sensed and felt. To that end, walking with others offered a rich medium for sensory representation and the ways in which the participants interacted (Pink, 2015). The first author noted her experience of taking part in one of the invitations which assumed walking at the pace of a snail:

> We disembarked from the boat and entered the forest hammam… we walked through the forest at the pace of a snail and were instructed to observe what was on the forest floor. […] A hollow stump revealed a few frogs hiding in its bark, the artistically knit cobweb and chanterelle mushrooms. Most people spent a few moments exploring the old, dry and lifeless stump, smelling the inside of it and observing the beings that made it their home. In silence they were gesticulating, making each other aware of what they were seeing and smelling. (First author, field notes).

The importance of slowing down the moment, which some tourism researchers have recently advocated for, is obvious here (Farkić et al., 2020; Sheldon, 2020). The invitation termed 'walk at snail's pace' solicited strong sensory presence. Through this mediated experience the participants learned about the forest floor and its offerings, taking their time to smell the inside of the stump, observe the various life forms and sense the texture of its bark. Had the pace of movement not been slowed down, perhaps the old tree trunk would have remained unnoticed. This is what guided forest bathing is able to do - to slow down the tempo of movement in such a way that the objects come more clearly into focus and to prompt participants' sensory engagement with them. They were able to articulate the most dominant audio-visual impressions, of which the interplay of colours was perceived as a dominant 'sight':

> Colours […] sometimes tree trunks, sometimes canopy […] Light penetrating through leaves and branches and then I see different colours. (Eleni).

Gorana, another certified forest therapy guide, reported something similar, correlating the ocular experience with wellness benefits:

> Sun beams through the treetops […] *komorebi*, this is the forest hammam.

The impressions of sunlight that filters through the leaves of the trees, and the interplay of the light and leaves which project their shadows on the ground, were not uncommon among the participants. For some this was a new discovery, whilst others, certified guides in particular, had already been aware of its latent power for wellbeing. As Li (2018) suggests, in the Japanese tradition the *komorebi* phenomenon has a relaxing, soothing effect on people's mood. Shadows, luminosity and dappled forest floors influence the ways in which they construct meanings and a sense of place. This way of interacting with the surroundings, traditionally used as a natural chromotherapy through which the body regains energy and balance, can be valorised in forest-based wellbeing tourism.

The sonic and haptic experience appeared equally important in tuning into and negotiating the environment. The element of serendipitous encounters and complete openness towards the forest took the form of being nature's follower. At times it was difficult for the participants to explain how they felt. They would describe the sensation of being in the forest as feeling 'normal' or 'in balance', perhaps referring to their ontological belongingness to and harmonising with the natural world: being at ease with it, as part of it, not outside it, as voiced by Sanja:

> It is almost like when a mother embraces her child in such way that he almost doesn't see the light, but in a warm, soft way, and everything he smells is his mother's scent. The moment you enter the forest, step on the soft ground covered with leaves, you are in similar embrace and you feel protected and you can only feel the fresh smell of the forest.

The natural affordances (Rantala, 2010) acted as external stimuli triggering the sensual interplay between humans and forest, as reported by Gordana:

> I step into a world of secrets and surprises. I listen to the whisper of the leaves and find my tree, hug it and exchange stories with it. Then

> the scents and sounds take me for a walk. It depends on the time of year, but I always feel the conifers. I like to pick up a needle or a slip, rub it through my palms and smell it. I like to touch the moss and smell the moisture, but also the softness of it. The smell of earth always reminds me to express my gratitude.

Departing from the five-senses model, we here embrace more post-structural approaches to sensorium, allowing for experiences that go beyond hearing, seeing, looking, touching or tasting (Guerts, 2005). Clifford (2018), suggested that invitations are aimed at opening up new sensorial horizons, such as proprioception or imagination, as is obvious in Marko's response:

> What is inevitable is also the sense of my own movement on the ground. Many sounds are produced by people's activity, such as noise from vehicles, but it fades away as I delve deeper into the forest.

In reflecting on what senses the mindful walk in forest awakens in him, Marko referred to the awareness of his own movement through space. His kinaesthetic sense grounded him in time and space, and he was aware of his bodily presence in the forest. Furthermore, opening up one sensory pathway would often lead to other sensual dimensions of the experience, which worked together to produce a synaesthetic event (Golańska, 2015). By way of example, participants mentioned 'the smell of freedom' or 'mixed seasons in the forest air', 'the smell of a thick bush', 'the sound of life' or 'the smell of the colour green'. Diverse phenomenological experiences were all spontaneously mixed together resulting in a merging of the senses (Simner, 2012). The beauty of forest bathing lies in its potential to offer such synesthetic sensory experiences that can be carefully cultivated and mediated by forest guides, thus providing richer and more nuanced tourism experience.

2.4. Active reflection on the luxurious moments

What is luxurious in the forest-bathing experience is the mindful immersion in what we, the inhabitants of the industrialised and digitalised world, lack in our everyday lives: slowness, stillness or silence (Komppula & Konu, 2017). The meanings of the mindful forest bath were articulated through active reflections on comfortable embodiment in the forest landscapes. Common narratives extolled the power of forests to offer space for escape, to slow down the passage of time, ground us in the present moment. Forest bathing as a guided 'silent walk' (Konu, 2015) is an activity that participants embraced as an opportunity to just be with themselves, to return to self and nature. The permeating qualities of slowness, stillness, security and silence were often contained in describing the experience of mindful soaking up the forest atmosphere. The researcher noted in her diary the observation of one of the invitations:

> Everyone was wandering about, searching for their private space in which they could have the intimate conversation with the forest. Some leant against the trees, some stood motionless with their eyes closed, and some made very slow movements looking at the forest floor – as if they were absorbing this strange quietness.

This quietness, or silence, akin to diamonds being commonly considered as a luxurious commodity (Berry, 1994), is considered here as a 'luxury' as it is scarce and difficult to acquire in everyday life. When referring to silence, the participants extolled the absence of everyday noises and sounds, and the presence of the sounds of nature: the chirping of birds, the buzzing of insects, the humming of wind. These are the 'comfortable stimuli' which contribute to enhancing tourists' wellbeing (Komppula et al., 2017). The importance of quieting (Lynn et al., 2017) or distancing from their everyday thoughts and relaxation in the present moment emerges as one of the priorities of the forest bathing practice. Participants often used notions such as tranquility and peaceful belongingness to verbally express the quality of silence, both as 'peace and quiet' and unification with nature:

> For me, the relaxing forest atmosphere is the tranquility and peace I feel during my walk in the forest. Cessation of thoughts and stress […] that I am part of nature, that we are all one. (Kristina).

Gordana expressed her feelings in a similar way:

> I love that feeling of letting go of worries and problems […] they just go away. I like to hear the silence. Silence becomes a space for reflection, for memories, for emotions… the emptiness and fullness of the moment.

The active reflection on what quietness or silence mean in the context of the forest bathing experience was prompted by the mindful and meaningful immersion in the forest. Forest bathing offers tourists an opportunity to pause and reflect, to temporarily distance themselves from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, to hear their own thoughts, to re-energise (Konu, 2015). The forest was considered by the participants as a place of escape, as a place for transformation, and as an Ultima Thule where the weight of life temporarily disappears:

> During the forest walk I felt peace for the first time. […] For me, the forest became a hiding place and a refuge when I want to run away from the whole world […] into myself. (Kristina).

> Only in the forest do I manage to exclude everyday disturbing influences, crowds, work, deadlines, noise. (Valentina).

The forest was interpreted as an embodiment of a utopian world, the place to which many inhabitants of urban agglomerations, who have a strict work/life pattern and very little or no free time, aim to occasionally escape. Interestingly, such urges for escape were principally voiced by the millennials, troubled by an ever more accelerative way of life (Floros, Cai, McKenna, & Ajeeb, 2019). More recently, the restrictive lockdowns and an increased digital connectedness have been recognised as a certain route to illbeing, and possibilities for breaking away from such realities are increasingly sought in a natural ambience (Farkić & Taylor, 2019). Moving beyond the pandemic, people will experience a priority shift, get back to basics and reconsider what it means to be healthy; they may even replace a sense of owning with a sense of belonging (Rutz et al., 2020). To teach people how to slow down, how to reconnect with self and nature, and to facilitate the mindful journey through the forest – these are the 'luxurious moments' that forest-based wellbeing tourism is able to offer.

3. Conclusion

This paper worked towards deepening our understanding of the significance that forest bathing has for improving tourist wellbeing. In aiming to contribute to scholarship concerned with achieving wellbeing through forest-based tourism, it specifically embraced the practice of forest bathing as an emergent global wellness trend. Taking a sensory approach, we sought to explore the lived experiences of those who engage in this activity, and show how the forest is experienced and understood in the broader context of wellbeing tourism. We cultivated the concept of mindfulness to help us better understand what actually happens in the forest bathing experience.

There are several ways in which this study makes contribution to knowledge. Firstly, it complements the prevalent quantitative research on medical aspects of forest bathing by taking a qualitative approach to studying the lived experiences of forest bathers. In so doing, it extends the forest-based wellbeing tourism research (Konu, 2015; Konu & Laukkanen, 2010) through providing novel insights into the ways in which humans, through mindful bodily presence and sensory immersion, take in the forest – how it impacts their physical health, as well as their emotional and psychological states. To date, however, interrogations of mediated forest bathing benefits through a tourism lens have been limited (Ohe et al., 2017). Our findings suggest how forest practices that induce wellbeing states exhibit latent potential as touristic experiences. These insights further help advance our understanding of the significance of mindfulness in constructing a sense of wellbeing through immersion in the arboreal environment. To that end, each of the findings sections worked towards illuminating the ways in which the participants constructed experiences in a mindful way: being aware of the physical, mental and emotional processes, focusing on the senses and actively reflecting on the meanings of experiences afforded by the forest. The processes of awareness, attentiveness, focus and reflection that were distilled in the analysis have ultimately led us to conceptualise forest bathing as a mindful tourism practice.

By offering forest bathing, the tourism industry can help "in realizing its potential to contribute to the wellbeing of all living beings and their conscious development" (Sheldon, 2020, p.10). How the implementation of forest bathing in tourism strategies can aid the sustainable development of destinations warrants further attention. Here, we focussed on a region in which forest-based wellbeing tourism is still in its infancy, exploring the potential inclusion of forest bathing in Serbia's tourism offer and the national tourism strategy, as well as the ways in which it may be conceptualised, packaged and delivered.

The global wellbeing industry has seen highly significant growth over the past decade (Global Wellness Institute, 2018) and the newest trend of prescribing non-pharmacological prescriptions (Rx Nature) has already taken place in some countries (James, Christiana, & Battista, 2019). Harmonising guided forest bathing practices with existing tourism or therapeutic programmes may represent an innovative and unique forest-based wellbeing tourism offer, and destination managers and marketeers should explore the development and promotion of such practices to differentiate their tourism offer and capitalise on this increasing consumer appetite.

The concept and practice of forest bathing may work as a powerful stimulus not only for contributing to more sustainable utilisation of natural resources, but also for fostering the development of tourism activities in often more economically marginalised areas. It is recommended that regional tourism planners take cognisance of these findings as well as the implications from practical applications of wellbeing tourism activities in forest-rich areas. The Finnish project "From forest bathing to green roofs" (Natural Resources Institute Finland, 2020) or the INTERREG IPA CBC Hungary – Serbia "Natural selfness - NATESS" (Natural Selfness, 2020) initiative may exemplify how to expand tourism services into natural settings, as well as addressing seasonality issues in regions with a short tourist season. The central tenets of the forest bathing experience may conduce its staging across the seasons, the forest's 'rebirth' in Spring creating a textual, visual and olfactory juxtaposition to the 'decay' of the Fall.

Recognising that a limitation of this study is the lack of insights from regions that have already operationalised this concept (for example Germany, Spain, the Balkans), we invite researchers from different countries to contribute to these debates, each from their own cultural perspectives. We also call for further research into the mindful and spiritual dimensions of forest-based wellbeing tourism. Researchers exploring embodied, affective and visceral dimensions of the nature-based experience may take interest in deepening our understanding of what taking a forest bath means in the broader context of human experience. There is value in exploring the social aspect of this practice and its contribution to people's sense of wellbeing through shared forest bathing experiences. Tourism researchers should also consider exploring the utilisation of urban green spaces for mediated forest bathing as part of a tourist offer in cities worldwide. Quantitative data may also help support our findings and expand the knowledge on how mindful tourism practices in forest-rich areas contribute to people's overall health and sense of wellbeing.

Ultimately, the reality of our everyday lives may be given balance by reimagining our identities through immersion in and reconnection with the natural world. Forest bathing may contribute to minimising people's anxieties, disturbances, illnesses and fears, and maximising the subjective sense of wellbeing, particularly in the uncertain times in which we currently live. The permeating feeling of being disoriented, destabilised or threatened by deadly microorganisms may be equilibrized by our measured, responsible return to self through mindful tourism activities in a natural ambience. Furthermore, the concept and practice of forest bathing may work as a powerful tool in contributing to healthy local communities by increasing ecological literacy and engendering intuitive stewardship of the forests, while supporting global health and wellness trends through this very basic and primeval activity.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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