

# Need to unplug? Take a guided hike and 'bathe' all of your senses in the natural world

By Aaron Simon Gross, The Berkshire Eagle | 10 min ago | 4 min to read



Micah Mortali, seen here leading a group at Kripalu, acknowledged that people living in cities "can get outside more, but the outside is just concrete," he said. PHOTO PROVIDED BY MICAH MORTALI

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You're in the woods. You take a deep breath and just listen. No headphones, no conversation; you're alone with the wind rustling the trees, the smell of the oak and — oh yeah — a guide.

In the past few years, guided "forest bathing" has become an incredibly popular activity in the Berkshires. There's no water involved in the practice, which derives its name from the Japanese term "shinrin-yoku."

Instead, guides lead participants through a series of exercises to "bathe" all their senses in nature, connecting with what guides call the "more-than-human" natural world.

"There's a huge interest in this work," said [Micah Mortali](#), founding director of the [Kripalu School of Mindful Outdoor Leadership](#). The school has "been a resounding success both financially and from a mission standpoint." Indeed, since it was founded in 2018, it's graduated almost 350 guides.

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That's to say nothing of the many forest bathing opportunities that Kripalu [offers its visitors](#), with twice-monthly mindful hiking workshops attracting around 45 people each.

[Miraval Berkshires](#) and [Canyon Ranch Lenox](#) have similar programs that incorporate forest bathing, and there are plenty of independent guides who lead this work outside of those institutions.

Mortali defines forest bathing as "opening all your senses to the forest atmosphere. And you would think that would just come naturally to everyone but what I've noticed is people have forgotten how to do that," he said.

"A lot of people who consider themselves hikers or outdoorsy are often doing it with others or are listening to a podcast. It's a very different experience to take the earbuds out or choose to be socially silent and listen to what's happening around you."

His nine-day course incorporates aspects of forest bathing before going a little broader, teaching techniques for leading sharing circles alongside lessons about, say, the history of the land, led by an instructor from the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican tribe.

Many of the students are interested in integrating the practice into their full-time professions. There are social workers, public and private school educators, doctors and nurses, physical therapists, hunters and foragers.

"We're seeing folks from a really interesting cross section of careers," he said.

Over the past few years, educators at [Hancock Elementary School](#) and [Williams College](#) have led forest bathing for their students. [Eagle columnists have sung the practice's praises](#) and authors have written books like [Hannah Fries' "Forest Bathing Retreat"](#).

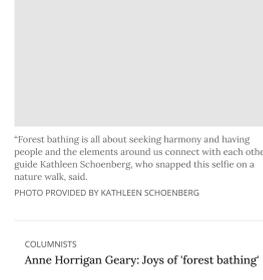
More recently, "forest bathing" has gotten national coverage in outlets as varied as [Vogue](#) and [CNN](#). In the past month alone, NPR aired a story on [the science behind forest bathing](#) and National Geographic published an article with the headline, "[You've heard of forest bathing. Now try forest therapy.](#)"

Mortali noted that while it's often practiced in this formalized way by folks with time and disposable income, particularly retired people, Kripalu's efforts to diversify clientele — including a [Global Majority/BIPOC Affinity Circle](#) — have paid off. Other organizations are more pointedly focused on that work, like the Berkshires-based [The Rusty Anvil](#), which is specifically committed to "BIPOC forest bathing immersion."

When asked why he thinks it's so proliferated, Mortali paraphrased one of his favorite nature writers, Richard Louv: "the more tech we have in our lives, we'll always crave an equal amount of nature."

"Nature has a way of bringing us back to ourselves," Mortali said. Forest bathing "can be psychedelic. It can be cathartic. It can be overwhelming. It can be emotional and bring a lot up for people."

Mortali said that forest bathing lowers the stress hormone cortisol by 14 percent and boosts the immune system. He also cited a [World Health Organization study that called cardiovascular diseases were the leading global cause of death](#) and [research on trees releasing phytoncides that help us fight diseases](#).



"Forest bathing is all about seeking harmony and having people and the elements around us connect with each other," guide Kathleen Schoenberg, who snapped this selfie on a nature walk, said. PHOTO PROVIDED BY KATHLEEN SCHOENBERG

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"So I don't think it's a big stretch to say a lot of the illness and suffering we're seeing has something to do with people being disconnected from their natural habitat," he said.

Some guides initially find it funny to take a course to lead people through something that is presumably so primal.

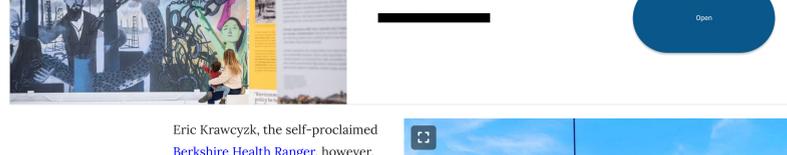
"I can tell you that I've been forest bathing my entire life, I just didn't have a name for it," Kathleen Schoenberg, who led [a recent forest bathing experience at Arrowhead](#), said.

A few years ago, Schoenberg, a charter school consultant and attorney by trade, read about a [Forest Therapy School](#) with formal training and her interest was piqued. "So I kept my eye on the various certification courses," she said. Last year, she finally did the five-day course, which put first aid and CPR certifications alongside relaxation and connection exercises.

"Forest therapy training is a lot about learning to set aside your own judgment, your own perspectives and your own opinions about things," she said. "Really allowing for other people's experiences to take the forefront. I am not a therapist, nor do I pretend to be one, but they train you for experiences where someone's traumatic experience may come up." The week is followed by a six-week practicum with various assignments.

In her first season as a licensed professional, Schoenberg led around 12 tours, with clients primarily being visitors who found her on [Airbnb Experiences](#).

"I started heavily advertising in June and got an immediate response," she said. "A lot of people are looking for a way to unplug."



[Eric Krawczyk](#), the self-proclaimed [Berkshire Health Ranger](#), however, insists he does not see much local interest in forest bathing. "If Vogue is speaking to it nationally, that's different," he said. "But I didn't see it ever happen or become a significant offering in this area at all."



Berkshire Health Ranger Eric Krawczyk incorporates mood swinging sessions at Laurel Lake into some outdoor immersion programs. PHOTO PROVIDED BY ERIC KRAWCZYK

Following an interview for this story, he reached out to multiple local outdoor immersion guides before writing in an email to The Eagle: "It sounds like none have been able to generate any subsistence from guiding and require different jobs/offers in the community to live."

He acknowledged the programs at Kripalu, Canyon Ranch and Miraval.

He called monthly Mountain Mindfulness Walks organized by Mount Greylock State Park Visitor Center Ranger Meshell Bordeleau "one of the longest running forest bathing programs in the Berkshires," and mentioned local [Happy Trails Guiding](#), run by Odin Adolphson.

Still, he doesn't sense a [forest bathing] presence," Krawczyk said.

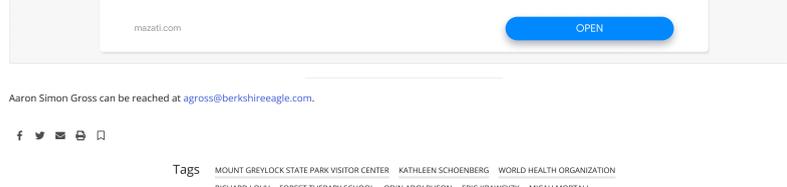
"With the development of the [Greylock Glen outdoor education center](#) and the town's current consideration of director candidates, they could improve the capacity for more forest therapy guide services in the Berkshires," he wrote. "I hope your story can help encourage the readers to support the guide community."

In December 2022, the commonwealth established the [Massachusetts Office of Outdoor Recreation](#), of which many guides are hoping will help fund, manage and track the industry in-state.



Micah Mortali, seen here leading a workshop at Kripalu, said that "15 years into the smartphone, people are at the end of their ropes." PHOTO PROVIDED BY MICAH MORTALI

"We're going to see people offering this work in schools, in corporations, in governments, with veterans, all different types of groups," Mortali said. "Because I think it's a big part of the medicine people need. And the medicine the Earth needs. Because we're part of Earth."



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Tags: MOUNT GREYLOCK STATE PARK VISITOR CENTER | KATHLEEN SCHOENBERG | WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION | RICHARD LOUV | FOREST THERAPY SCHOOL | ODIN ADOLPHSON | ERIC KRAWCZYK | MICAH MORTALI | KRIPALU SCHOOL OF MINDFUL OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP | CANYON RANCH LENOX | MASSACHUSETTS OFFICE OF OUTDOOR RECREATION

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