

Roni Bintang/Reuters



Nissin, Kraft and Heinz are just some of the companies that will neither confirm nor deny that palm oil used in their products comes from recently burned, or illegally deforested, land.

‘The majority of companies remain overly complacent with their supply chain,’ stresses Fiona Mulligan, Palm Oil Campaigner with Greenpeace. ‘Companies must work together as a driving force for change – no trader, producer or consumer company can accomplish this by itself. And all are, in some way, complicit in causing Indonesia’s fires.’

RAN Agribusiness Campaign Director Gemma Tillack agrees. ‘As palm oil plantations spread across Indonesia and beyond, rainforests are falling faster than ever and systematic abuse of communities and workers’ rights is rife.’

As the rains finally doused last season’s fires, President Joko Widodo – prompted by the upcoming Paris talks – promised to end planting on peat and announced the creation of a peatland restoration initiative. And it’s said that the new commissioner of the Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission has a well-known green streak.

Let’s hope that corruption in the forestry sector will be one of his priorities. ■

Nithin Coca is an activist and writer. He splits his time between California and Southeast Asia.

1 Carbon Brief, nin.tl/carbon-brief 2 *The Guardian*, nin.tl/guardian-fires 3 Wetlands International, nin.tl/peatlands-assessment

The red fruits of the palm oil tree which are crushed to release the valuable oil. Indonesia is now the world’s top palm oil exporter.

Forest ba

TINA BURRETT and CHRISTOPHER SIMONS
explore deep woods therapy in Japan.

The neon lights, packed streets and urban sprawl of downtown Tokyo are one take on modern Japan. But there is a quieter, less hectic side beyond the country’s seething cities. More than 70 per cent of Japan is mountainous, and two-thirds of the land is forested. So it is little wonder that Japan’s rivers, mountains and forests play a central role in its spiritual and cultural life.

Shinto, the ancient ethnic religion of Japan, contains important elements of nature worship. Natural elements in the landscape – waterfalls, mountains and rivers – as well as earthquakes and storms are thought to embody spirits, or *kami*. Japanese mythology also includes tree spirits like the dryads of Greek mythology, known as *kodama*.

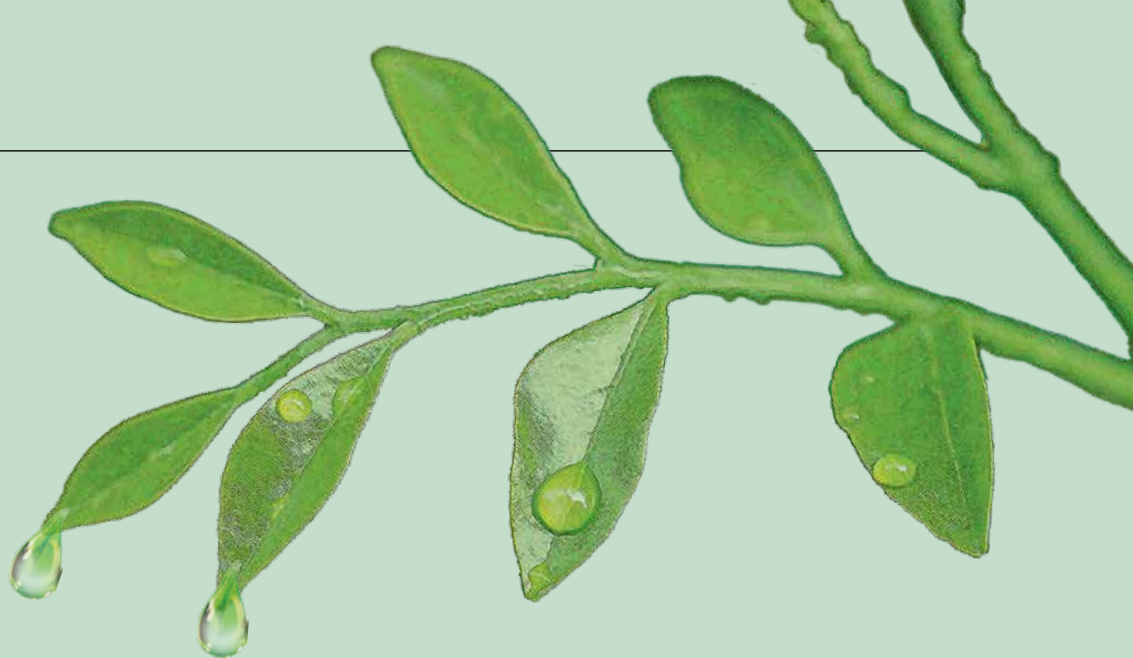
A century before poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge sought spiritual and social regeneration through nature, Matsuo Bashō, Japan’s most celebrated *haiku* poet, renounced urban life. Bashō journeyed out of Edo (modern Tokyo) and immersed himself in the Japanese wilderness. His close observations of trees and forests in all seasons – from the *aoba wakaba* (green, young leaves of summer) to a crow on a bare branch in *akinokure* (late autumn) – provide enduring reminders of the fundamental connections between life, art and our nature.

Less stress

Today, forest and mountain walking remain popular pastimes. Every year, thousands of Japanese urbanites reconnect with nature through pilgrimages to the 88 temples of rural Shikoku, the smallest of Japan’s major islands, or along the ancient forest routes of Kumano, which stretch across the Kii Peninsula south of Osaka. The popularity of Hayao Miyazaki’s animated film *Princess Mononoke* (1997) has encouraged a younger generation of forest walkers to visit the *Mononoke Hime no Mori* (Princess Mononoke Forest) on the lush, subtropical island of Yakushima.

But the Japanese practice of ‘forest bathing’, or *shinrin yoku*, brings a walk in the woods to a new level of intensity. Forest bathing doesn’t require a

thing



Writers, artists and musicians have long argued that communing with nature refreshes the human spirit

A group of women enter the bamboo forest garden at Hokokuji Temple in Kamakura, Japan.

swim suit. It's about submerging yourself in the sights, sounds and smells of the woods.

A 2004 study from the Nippon Medical School suggests what many of us know intuitively: time spent in a forest lowers stress and promotes improved physical and mental health.

Based on these findings, some municipal governments in Japan are promoting certain sites as designated forest therapy bases.

'Experience shows that the scents of trees, the sounds of brooks and the feel of sunshine through forest leaves can have a calming effect,' says Yoshifumi Miyazaki, director of the Centre for Environment Health and Field Sciences at Chiba University.¹ Participants are encouraged to immerse fully in the landscape, stimulating all five of their senses by experiencing the sound of wind, the heat of the sun, the colour of the leaves, the feel of the bark and the smell of the trees.

Working life in Tokyo, the world's largest metropolis, is notoriously stressful. Six-day work weeks are the norm, and although company employees receive paid vacation, workplace pressure makes some people afraid to take time off. Even schoolchildren put in long hours, with many attending *juku* (cram schools) after regular school hours.



Daily grind

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 22 per cent of Japanese employees work 50 or more hours a week, compared to 11 per cent in the US and 8 per cent in France.² Unpaid overtime has become such a severe problem that it is now associated with a host of physical and mental illnesses. The Japanese language even has a word for it: *karoshi*, meaning 'death by overwork'. In 2013 alone, 133 people died from work-related causes including strokes, heart attacks and suicide.³

For many people, forest bathing offers a soothing remedy to the daily grind.

Writers, artists and musicians have long argued that communing with nature refreshes the human spirit – what Wordsworth called a 'never-failing principle of joy'; the 20th century gave these ideas scientific footing. The theory that human fascination with other living things influences our mental development stretches back to EO Wilson's 1984 book, *Biophilia*.⁴

But the future of the immersive forest experience is under threat in modern Japan. Decades of government spending on public works aimed at reviving rural economies have seen large chunks of forest felled to make way for roads, dams and other infrastructure projects. In 2014, the government earmarked \$52 billion for public works spending. Since Japan's economy collapsed in the early 1990s, the state has pumped trillions of dollars into these 'concrete white elephants'. Critics say stimulus money would be better spent encouraging rural tourism. Such a shift could both boost the economy and improve the health of the country's weary workforce. Time in the woods might be just what the doctor ordered. ■

Tina Burrett is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Sophia University, Tokyo. Her partner, **Christopher Simons**, is Associate Professor of Humanities at International Christian University, also in Tokyo.

¹ *Japan Times*, nin.tl/forest-therapy ² OECD, nin.tl/oecd-balance ³ *Japan Times*, nin.tl/japan-karoshi ⁴ EO Wilson, *Biophilia* (Harvard University Press, 1984). See also Stephen R Kellert, *Kinship to Mastery: Biophilia in Human Evolution and Development* (Island Press, 1997).

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