



**ECOTHERAPY AS PLACE-BASED INQUIRY**  
**– Project Report towards the Completion of**  
**the Diploma in Ecotherapy –**  
**Tariki Trust**

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## I. From Academia to Ecotherapy: The Journey and the Insights

I encountered ecotherapy in 2021, while still employed as an associate professor at the Kyoto Institute of Technology, a national university. I had held a variety of academic positions since moving to Japan in 2007 after completing my PhD in English Literature at the University of Porto. In recent years, however, the competitive, cerebral world of grant outputs and conference travels, lacklustre classrooms and committees had begun to feel less and less appealing. A sense of disconnection and isolation had settled in, eroding my life force.

To be sure, my commitment to research in the ever-expanding field of the environmental humanities – with a focus on place, landscape, and the ecology of fairy and folk tales – had not waned and I continued publishing extensively on these themes. And my love for the *wabi-sabi* beauty of the Japanese countryside, which spoke eloquently to my own introverted and melancholic temperament, only deepened with the years. Yet, for over a decade the daily enmeshment in the hectic pursuits and demands of academia left little mental space for envisioning alternative professional paths along which I could stitch all these dimensions together in a more rooted and community-oriented way of life.

Doing the Ten Directions Training Programme (2021-2022) at Tariki Trust allowed me not just to reconnect with a new sense of purpose and a community of practice, but also to envisage new professional possibilities that do not wholly discard but *build on* my existing skills and strengths. No

less significantly, developing a daily ecotherapy practice of connection with the place where I live has compelled me to retrieve, revive and weave together, in a spirit of ongoing inquiry, those loose threads that had laid untapped at the edge of my consciousness for years.

The Buddhist framework of the Ten Directions Programme provided me with a solid container that was at the same time generously pliable and expansive, encouraging interconnection and experimentation. And experiment I did, by engaging in the daily exercises and also by establishing connections across the various themes informing the units – e.g. vibrancy and embedded living (Unit 5) *through* the prism of myth, storytelling and creativity (Unit 4).

But it was the Diploma format that allowed me to understand in more depth how my own mind, freed from academic constraints and shaped afresh by Buddhist teachings, works and can more effectively serve a fulfilling and vibrant life path that, hopefully, will lead to a sustainable professional occupation in a not too distant future.

As I engaged in the Diploma's monthly journaling tasks and online exchanges with the group, I came to understand that my mind is at its most creative when allowed to work in an exploratory and accretive manner, gathering knowledge from different fields and then slowly, *very slowly* weaving together the strands that resonate, thereby creating new personalised maps for negotiating and navigating what I often feel is an intractable, labyrinthine, over-complex world. I see this as an intricate process of trial and error, an incessant movement back and forth between

the theoretical and the practical, the conceptual and the concrete, the imagination and the world of our corporeal existence.

That is how my energy tends to tell me where it wants to go and, no less importantly, where it *doesn't want* to go. In retrospect, I realise that perhaps what had made me feel so stagnant and disconnected in the academic career was that all too often I found myself in over-intellectualised settings, trapped in hyper-abstract loops wholly missing the right-hand side of the equation. Ecotherapy practice has helped me redress this imbalance and see things more clearly.

My unfolding relationship with storytelling in ecotherapy has been at the centre of this transformative journey. Despite my research background in fairy-tale studies and folklore, I knew very little about the potential uses of storytelling in therapeutic contexts. Eager to learn more, between 2021 and 2022 I sought opportunities to hone oral storytelling skills by taking a couple of courses and also by participating, as a presenter and performer, in a variety of events involving live storytelling.

While this has been an exhilarating learning experience, I came to realise that storytelling of the *stand-up-and-do-it variety* is not where I want to channel my energy – at least not at this very early stage. For one thing, temperamentally I am disinclined to put myself at the centre of attention as a performer-entertainer and prefer less conspicuous roles of facilitation. In addition, preparing for performances is time-consuming and would likely distract me from certain tasks I need to prioritise right now.



There is, however, a key aspect of this art form that is at the core of my current ecotherapy endeavours; in fact, everything seems to radiate from here. Let me explain.

I set great store by Martin Shaw's suggestion, in *Courting the Wild Twin* (2020), that one of the ancient roles of the storyteller is to be "a cultural historian of place." By this he means the slow process of *unconditioning* through which we become *of* a place, by establishing a dynamic, psychoactive relationship with it, so as to hone a receptivity to the ways the place wishes to be loved. The process involves "diligent listening, repetitious acts and an ever-deepening sense of devotion." But it also crucially involves joining the daily flow of community life, by attending our ears "to the gossip of local folklore, plant life, the myriad ways people blurt, croon and whisper to one another and the wider world."

Since ancient times, stories have been the main doorway of communication with the land. Yet, if in those early times stories sprung organically from the land into the ears and mouths of its dwellers, in these late times of acute ecological crisis and epochal transitions, they reach our garbage-ridden shores as broken-off fragments: liminal, disorientated, requiring shelter.

Ever since I moved to a devitalised village off the beaten track in northern Yamanashi in the spring of 2021, my training in ecotherapy has unfolded in tandem with the ever-deepening awareness of the need to develop *home-making* skills to welcome and share such stories in this downshift. Hence what follows is itself a story that aspires to weave together experiential themes of community and locality, foraging and folklore,

growing and making things, in an attempt to restore the broken affective ties between people and place through ecotherapy practice.

## **II. Ecotherapy, Landscape and the Lived Environment**

Ogasawara, today part of Hokuto City, is one among the dozens of small mountain villages in Yamanashi Prefecture struggling with terminal depopulation as a result of outmigration to the cities, rapidly ageing villagers and the decline of wet-rice farming as a livelihood activity. These stark realities are apparent, with increasing ubiquity, in the landscape, which is strewn with abandoned farm houses, fallowed rice fields and agricultural wasteland. Most likely, many of these fields will remain uncultivated and get reclaimed by the surrounding unkempt woods before long. It's a haunting, wounded landscape, reminiscent of those SF films depicting a post-apocalyptic world.

To be sure, in recent years – especially after the onset of the Covid pandemic – there has been a steady influx of newcomers from the big cities, seeking to recover from urban fatigue and career burnout. Very often these newcomers settle in out-of-the way locations, at a safe distance from the strictures of village community life, which in rural Japan involve regular committee meetings and specially designated days for collective weed and brush clearing along forests. I count myself among them, though as a foreigner I am part of an even tinier minority whose integration in local life can be slow and challenging.

It is among these new residents that small communities of interest are formed, mostly around the making of traditional crafts (e.g. indigo dyeing), fermenting, foraging and food tasting. In the absence of well-maintained public spaces for leisure, the gathering places of choice tend to be refurbished old farm houses (*kominka*) turned into homely cafés.



Over the past two years, becoming a regular at one of these cafés and participating in their events has allowed me ample opportunity to observe from close range people's interactions among themselves and with space. And as I did so, I began noticing a number of culturally-inflected patterns that I would need to take into account when offering my first in-person ecotherapy events to local residents.

For one thing, these residents' focus and sphere of movement seems to be quite narrow, privileging domesticated, safe spaces like gardens. Even when engaging in foraging activities, they seldom venture more than a couple of metres away from the venue of the event. Also, I was struck by how little attention participants appear to be giving to the scenic aspect of the landscape, despite the presence of spectacular snow-covered peaks, including the famed Mount Fuji.



Perhaps the reason why these patterns intrigued me is that my own perception of the Japanese landscape had long been conditioned by the aesthetic standards established by the literary and visual arts: the travel writings and haiku of Sagyō and Bashō, the *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige, the cinematography of Akira Kurosawa. This



aesthetic appreciation values the sheer sensory appearance of the landscape, often at the expense of its non-perceptual significance, such as historical, sociological, political and economic associations, including the sufferings of those who have tilled the land through the ages. For example, famous series of woodblock prints like Hokusai's [\*Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji\*](#) (1830-1832) have generated a consensus around the inherent superiority of these highly stylised landscapes, which can override a more genuine, grounded appreciation and thereby blind us to those associations and their hidden painful histories.



By contrast, the residents seem to experience their surroundings as a *lived* environment or, as anthropologist Tim Ingold calls it, as a “taskscape” composed of the array of practices people carry out in the temporal process of inhabiting their environment, rather than as a scenery to be held from afar or through an artistic medium.



In my understanding, both dimensions are significant and can enrich or even correct each other. Hence, a question that has emerged from this inquiry is: how can I weave these dimensions together in my ecotherapy practice and offerings?

Another pattern that I noticed was the underlying notion of community shaping our joint activities at the *kominka* café. While there are some beloved domesticated animals – chicken, goats – within the perimeter of the garden, this love doesn't seem to extend beyond those domestic boundaries, even though the area is awash with wild fauna: deer, monkeys, racoons, civets, foxes. Perhaps due to their previous entanglements with urban hustle culture and the psychological damage it inflicts on interpersonal relations, people appear to be far more invested in establishing strong bonds with other residents rather than with the land and its non-human inhabitants.

While acknowledging the legitimacy of this need, I began to feel this was a rather *anthropocentric* understanding of community. Another question arose thus: how could my practice integrate a more comprehensive concept of community that extends beyond the human world and embraces wild plants, animals, but also nature spirits, elemental beings, ancestors and other beings that usually lie outside the reaches of our awareness, in line with current understandings in ecopsychology and community psychology?

Let me open a brief parenthesis to add that, in an inquiry of this nature and carried out within this kind of cultural context, the gestation of such questions is inevitably long and painstaking. In fact, when I started intuiting

them, in an inchoate manner, the issues felt so intractable that I thought it would be safer, at such an early stage, to focus my energy on creating online ecotherapy offerings targeted at international audiences with an interest in Japanese culture.

Yet, as I deepened my regular practice of attending to the wounded place where I live, stories came to my aid and showed me the way, though in their own subliminal, cryptic language. I fine-tuned my ears to dreams and eerie presences in the landscape, which suggested folklore-related themes to be researched at local libraries, which in turn took me to other wounded places in the region. And, crucially, as I began writing down and publishing these stories – in congenial publications such as [The Dark Mountain Project](#) and [Garland Magazine](#) – as well as integrating them in my online workshops, talks and lectures, I felt the irresistible pull of a magical energy field. I no longer felt just like the proverbial spectator or visitor to an exotic location. I felt I had finally begun to embody, in earnest, the role of cultural historian of place.

### **III. From Concept to Action: “Let’s Rediscover the Village through the Five Senses”**

A visit to Portugal in March this year (2023) and the successful co-facilitation of a small in-person ecotherapy event in a small village there, on the joint theme of forest bathing + haiku (in Portuguese; with 5 participants), provided the impetus I needed to bite the bullet once I returned to Japan.





On the 19th of July, I offered my first in-person ecotherapy event, a half-day forest bathing experience followed by a hearty Portuguese-style lunch in my garden.

The first steps of planning and preparation – including the choice of date, venue and fee (a symbolic 2,000 JPY per person) – were decided in consultation with the owners of my local *kominka* café.

Since this was the first time I was facilitating an in-person event in Japanese, I decided to make it a low-risk event by invitation only. I gathered

a total of 14 people, mostly among the local regulars of the café and some of their acquaintances. The predominant age group was 45-55 years old; there was also a young mother in her 30s and her three-year-old child, plus an elderly couple in their 70s. The participants coordinated the private transportation among themselves and parked their cars (a total of 5) conveniently in two designated parking spaces on my property.



While I did not publicise the event on social media, I did design a simple flyer with a brief description of the event and the schedule (10:00 AM - 2:00

PM), a list of things to bring (water; suitable clothing, shoes and hat; a small mat to sit on; a notebook and a pen or a pencil), and my contact information. The flyer was circulated privately on Messenger (Facebook and Instagram), where I also responded to the participants' queries.

Why did I choose my garden as the venue for the forest bathing activities and my house for the luncheon afterwards? This was partly for safety reasons – it is hard to find a safe and easily accessible spot in the neighbourhood at this time of the year –, partly to match the residents' clear preference for circumscribed outdoor spaces that ensure privacy and do not require much physical strain to move around, and partly to satisfy their natural curiosity about the private space of a foreign resident.

At the height of summer, the weather was extremely hot and humid, despite the overcast sky. My garden is located on a mild slope overlooking, on the southern side, a dense private oak woodland that provides shade and a pleasant palette of green tones and textures, as well as a profusion of cicada song and birdsong. I made sure that the grass in the garden was properly mowed to avoid snakes and ticks, and the ground levelled to prevent any tripping accidents. With the participants' consent, I also kept a potent outdoor mosquito coil burning throughout the whole event, as insect bites can be quite nasty during the summer months.

Regarding the line-up and content of the activities, I consulted with my mentor Stephen McCabe and with a colleague, Monique Walhof, who is a certified forest therapy guide in Portugal. From them I obtained not only much-needed reassurance, but also a rich variety of suggestions for



specific activities. Considering my lack of experience and also the circumstance that I would have to conduct the whole event in Japanese, I felt the need to prepare a detailed script for all the key activities well in advance. My Japanese partner provided invaluable assistance with the translation of specific terms. That's interdependence at work!



We began with an informal round of self-introductions (“introduce yourself and one thing you love about nature”) and a brief introduction to the concept of ecotherapy. This was followed by a grounding exercise and a short mindful walk in the immediate vicinity of the garden, with the goal of noticing, through the senses, the weather and the community of animal and plant beings living there.



I felt called to give the forest-bathing activity a strongly ritualistic quality, so as to add a fresh layer of perception to the residents' habitual sense of "taskscape," as described in the previous section. I gathered the participants around a sacred circle, which I opened with a ceremony invoking the Four Elements and the Four Directions, with four symbolic objects at the centre: Air → East (a feather); Fire → South (a candle); Water (a small bowl of water) → West; Earth → North (a small bowl of soil).

Then I slowly proceeded with a series of detailed and multilayered forest-bathing invitations to connect participants sensorily with the place and its community of beings, emphasising our joint histories – for example:

“Let’s awaken our tree-like imagination. Imagine tree roots coming out of your body and sinking down to the earth. How many other living beings are below your feet at the moment? How many have

been in this exact place before us? How many worlds are we standing on top of?

As your roots sink deeper, simply acknowledge that this land has taken a very long journey – many ages, many centuries – to be here today supporting us. What does it feel like to be meeting in this place, in this moment, rooted in the earth?”

Before finishing, I made sure to close the sacred circle by thanking the Four Elements and the Four Directions.

Then I invited the participants to spend about 20 minutes giving free creative shape to their experience. Participants were given the choice to stay in the garden, to use the ‘engawa’ veranda or to move to a cooler room inside the house, where paper, crayons and coloured pencils were provided.

There followed a relaxed and lively round of shares in the garden, during which participants presented their responses in a variety of formats: photography, drawings, poems and brief speeches.





The morning culminated in a leisurely buffet-style lunch of Portuguese food and refreshments prepared by myself and my partner.

Before leaving, participants were gently invited to fill in a simple feedback form with two questions (plus a permission request to use images of the event for research and promotion purposes):

1. What did you enjoy about the event?
2. What improvements would you suggest with a view to future events?

The feedback was extremely positive, overall. Several participants noted the sense of relaxation, restfulness and openness they felt as they expanded and deepened their connection with the energies of the place through the five senses. A sense of gratitude for the moments of conviviality spent around the sharing of food and for the opportunity to make new local friends was also highlighted by a number of participants. Food is, indeed, one of the great community binders in rural Japan.

Regarding question 2, several participants expressed their wish to participate in similar events in different seasons, to experience the sensory contrasts in the perception of the landscape.

As a facilitator, to have succeeded in engaging people in a practice that was new to them and to which they wouldn't have had access otherwise, as well as to have been able to convey clear instructions in a challenging language that took me over a decade to learn, felt immensely rewarding and encouraging.



#### **IV. Final Thoughts: Inauguration Hopes and Future Realism**

Considering my personal trajectory described in section I and the inquiry value ecotherapy practice has taken on for me, offering this first in-person event to a budding local community was invested with a deeply symbolic and inaugural meaning. First and foremost, it felt like a gesture of gratitude and abundance, made to reciprocate the generosity with which I was welcomed both by a culture that can pose significant barriers to the integration of outsiders and by a place that has had its fair share of wounds and troubles, staggering community collapse and environmental degradation.

Despite the enormous amount of planning and preparation involved, the event was so very worthwhile. Had I decided to go ahead with the initial plan of investing my energies in the creation of exclusive online offerings at a professional rate, most likely the full resonance of this gesture would have dissolved under the pressure of more practical concerns.

This said, due to pressing financial reasons and other professional considerations, I will only be able to offer a limited number of these community-oriented events throughout the year in the future (perhaps quarterly, to coincide with the changing seasons?). In a devitalised, out-of-the-way location such as this one, most local residents cannot afford regular events at professional rates. And, regrettably, Yamanashi is a rather impoverished prefecture, with no dynamism and very little public and institutional support available for high-quality cultural and social events.

Under such conditions, it is difficult to envisage a vibrant and sustainable path for ecotherapy as a professional activity here. Though it is challenging to make grand plans in these times of increasing uncertainty, what I have in mind is to continue diversifying my ecotherapy offerings in terms of both location and population, namely by organising in-person events in less peripheral places so as to attract a broader variety of clients from urban areas, and in collaboration with local organisations and projects (e.g. temples, libraries, artistic residencies). This may require, however, relocating – at least for a significant part of the year – to more dynamic areas with more affluent populations, a possibility I am now considering with my partner.

Concurrently, I plan to invest more time in writing and publishing books on themes relevant to ecotherapy, storytelling, myth and folklore. Hopefully, this will open up exciting opportunities as well as provide a more solid basis for establishing online programmes and workshops in the future. I will be designing and launching a website for this purpose within the next few weeks.

Last but not least, as a long-term sufferer of an autoimmune disorder that often badly affects my energy and requires rest, I will need to approach these challenges with a sense of balance, discernment and respect both for my strengths and for my limitations.

I feel immensely grateful that this grounded wisdom is at the very heart of the ecotherapy training and teachings I have received from my teachers at Tariki Trust.

With special thanks to the unstinting support and generous, luminous guidance of Caroline Brazier and Stephen McCabe throughout this Diploma Year of Study,

Daniela Kato

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