



## Forest Therapy Trail Certification Program

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### Overview

The concept of Forest Therapy is gaining global recognition as an evidence-based approach to wellness and health. Forest Therapy sessions consist of gentle walks in which a guide uses a range of techniques aimed primarily at slowing people down from what has become a “normal” frenetic pace, and calling attention to sensory experiences of the forest and its environment.

Forest Therapy Trail networks are being developed in several parts of the world, notably in Japan, South Korea, Costa Rica, the United States and Canada. The [Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs](#) (ANFT) has developed the process and criteria below for designating ANFT Certified Forest Therapy Trails. These are inspired by the process used in Japan, but with an important difference. In Japan, in order to qualify as a Forest Therapy Trail an empirical study must be completed, using specific research protocols that measure physiological effects on volunteers who use the trail in the context of guided forest therapy walks. One of many requirements for official trail status is that these studies provide evidence of beneficial effects specific to each particular trail.

ANFTs designation process draws from our belief that the simple act of going outside is physically healthy for people, no matter what physiological effects can be actively documented. We consider trails for designation based initially on criteria such as accessibility, safety, biodiversity, natural features, and management. Additionally, we consider how infrastructure and signage can promote both guided and self-guided Forest Therapy experiences on the trail.

ANFT designated trails fall into three categories:

1. Guided Experiences: Trails in which an ANFT Certified Guide will conduct Forest Therapy sessions. Trails in this category are designed to enhance the experience of guided Forest Therapy walks through basic infrastructure and accessibility alterations.
2. Self-guided Experiences: Trails in which signage allows visitors to replicate the experience of a guided Forest Therapy session without a guide. Such trails are often modified through the addition of signage (on-site or digital) designed specifically to allow visitors to guide themselves through a series of Forest Therapy invitations along the trail. Trails in this category are designed

with specific attention to the mitigation of safety concerns and the installation of some form of signage, QR codes, or App that can effectively serve for a self-guided experience.

3. Dual purpose Guided and Self-guided experience: Both methodologies are used in this trail designation.

### **Reasons for Designation**

Managers and staff who are stewards of natural areas often embrace, as a core part of their mission, developing programs that attract people to the land, often with the intention of promoting membership and the potential for many years of return visits. Oftentimes, such venues aim to provide an experience in which a visitor can experience the land in such a way that they feel they have ‘been there, done that’ and there is little potential for return visits. One aim of our trail designation and certification program is to provide visitors with an experience that facilitates their falling in love with the land through intimate connection, and thus promoting the possibility for visitors to return to the places they love, over and over again.

ANFT seeks to supplement programs that typically emphasize education related to conservation, and recreational opportunities of many kinds with an experience of Forest Therapy that is principally about connecting to the land through the senses and the heart. Programs of this type often lead to partnerships with education and recreation-oriented organizations, and thus create a more holistic approach to land management and tourism programs.

There is a trend toward leveraging time in nature for its beneficial impacts on mental health and overall physical wellness. For example, children who suffer from Attention Deficit and related disorders often show marked improvement when they are given time to simply play, explore, and indulge their curiosity in natural settings such as streams and forests. Adults who experience chronic, low-grade stress (of which they may not even be aware) can quickly and easily retune their nervous systems, through nature-based, sensory connection, leading to a wide range of benefits such as reduced blood pressure, improved immune system response, and stabilization of moods. The emerging emphasis on the health benefits of forests and natural environments opens new possibilities for partnerships. Health care organizations, employee wellness programs, and groups that promote healthy living in general may be attracted to developing programs related to Forest Therapy.

Posting signs that indicate that a trail has been designated as a Certified Forest Therapy Trail through ANFT also increases public awareness of the health benefits of being in forests and practicing Forest Therapy. It is likely that seeing these signs will pique visitors’ curiosity, hopefully, inspiring them to seek additional information about the Forest Therapy practice and associated programs. Signage may also include links, QR codes, websites or other supportive guidance, such as ANFT and other partner sites, where more information about Forest Therapy and the ANFT Certified Forest Therapy Trail Program is provided.

### **What is a Trail? Some Surprising Examples:**

A Forest Therapy Trail is a path or area where people of a wide range of fitness and accessibility levels can interact with nature, primarily through their senses. These trails do not always conform to typical ideas of what constitutes a trail. Here are a few examples of different types of trails.

**Sensoria: Land of Senses, Guanacaste, Costa Rica:** Located on the northern slope of the Rincón de la Vieja Volcano National Park, adjacent to the 142 km<sup>2</sup> protected area, this site is a one and a half hour drive from Liberia and the trail at Sensoria is accessible by 4x4 vehicle. Sensoria can arrange transportation to the trail. Sensoria consists of primary lush, tall, green cloud forest and various waterfalls, thermal and mineral natural pools and numerous creeks. Sensoria's enchanting jungle trail take you along bright blue water springs, deliciously warm thermal pools, rushing waterfalls and the chance to see some of Costa Rica's famed wildlife, naturally protected in this private wildlife sanctuary at the skirts of Rincón de la Vieja Volcano. At the main house, guest can change and leave their belongings in a locker. After the trail, they will be coming back here for a hearty, delicious lunch.

**Creekside Nature Trail, Sugarloaf Ridge State Park, California:** This trail, located about a 20 minutes' drive time from the nearest urban area, is a loop trail of less than one mile. It hosts approximately 50% forest canopy, with the remaining landscape bordering or entering into meadow ecosystems. There are areas of gentle incline, and one short section of steeper incline. This short section, which is approximately in the middle section of the loop, is challenging for some individuals. When necessary, guides will modify their itineraries from walking the entire loop trail to offering an out-and-back Forest Therapy walk. There are three meadow areas, two of which are suitable for exploration and sit spot activities. The trail crosses two creeks. The smaller creek runs year-round, is a few inches deep and is not bridged. Its banks can accommodate a dozen people or so, for guided interactions with water. The larger creek runs year-round, typically with about three times the volume of the smaller one. It is up to 12 inches deep. The trail crosses this creek on a footbridge suspended about 8 feet above the creek. There is easy access from either end of the bridge to places where people can interact with the water.

**Flower and Vegetable Garden, Spring Lake Village Retirement Center, Santa Rosa CA:** This large retirement center is on the outskirts of a suburban area. It is bound on one side by a year-round creek. There is a paved roadway for emergency vehicle access between the buildings and the banks of the creek. Along this roadway are both native and introduced trees, shrubs, and flowers. At the corner of the property there is a cluster of eight garden beds, each about 12 by 6 feet and about 30 inches high. They contain a mix of flowers and vegetables. From these beds, a paved trail enters about 40 feet to a cleared circle next to the creek. An ancient oak tree shades this clearing, which also contains benches.

These examples are highlighted to encourage out-of-the box thinking when considering areas that might serve the Forest Therapy experience and could become part of the certified trail network. The process of exploring for and discovering a suitable trail need not be confined to wild areas. It may include places, such as urban parks and forests, landscaped grounds of hospitals and community health centers, community gardens, arboretums, botanical gardens, local, state and national public lands, private lands such as tree farms/forests, and an array of other spaces that may be utilized to share the Forest Therapy practice. In the cases of traditional trails, both existing trails and trails constructed with nature and forest therapy can be considered for trail certification.

### **The Process of Trail Designation**

If after you, as a landowner, land manager or community member, read this entire document, and you feel that there is a local trail or setting in your area that might be appropriate, we encourage you to contact us directly via email at [trails@anft.earth](mailto:trails@anft.earth) for a discussion of your project and how we might be able to support you.

Trails must be certified by a trained ANFT Trail Consultant who are certified to conduct trail assessment and designation in partnership with the ANFT central office. The fees described below are paid to the ANFT, and a separate contract is developed between land managers and trail certification consultants who will conduct the work on site.

**Phase 1:**

1. The initial application fee is \$500 USD. This fee covers the Association's costs as we support the landowner/land manager and the ANFT Trail Consultant with the preliminary assessment and documentation. The outcome of these tasks is to provide you with a realistic sense of whether your proposed trail is a solid candidate, and what improvements might be needed. This will give you a chance to review your budget and other resources to determine if this is a good time for you to proceed with the second phase of certification.
2. Establish Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between the land manager and the trail consultant and between the land manager and ANFT.
3. Read the trail criteria and identify if there is a trail in your area of operations that might be a good fit for this designation and certification program. If so, we will connect you with an ANFT Trail Consultant who can conduct the trail certification process and engage in a preliminary assessment and provide recommendations for any improvements that must be implemented in order to be deemed an ANFT Certified Forest Therapy Trail.
4. The ANFT Trail Consultant will send us the preliminary assessment along with a trail map, photos and video, and any recommendations for trail alterations. If you wish to establish your trail as a self-guided trail experience, the Trail Consultant will also design a customized set of invitations to match your trail and offer translations into multiple languages if you anticipate a large number of foreign clients will walk the trail. The cost of translation services will not be covered in the agreement, so the land manager and Trail Consultant will be required to make separate arrangements and an alternate agreement for this service.
5. ANFT will review your photos and trail assessment with the Trail Consultant. During this review, we will collaborate with the Trail Consultant to revise your preliminary assessment and make recommendations for trail alterations. In general, we are looking for low-cost improvements that can be made with minimal additional investment, when possible. Recommended improvements will be prioritized, and ranked as essential, recommended, and non-essential. All essential improvements (if any) must be completed prior to Designation.

**Phase 2:**

1. In this phase, the focus is on making trail improvements, and/or on matching Forest Therapy invitations to specific places along the trail.
2. After making all priority improvements (those rated "essential" during the assessment) the Trail Consultant will return to document the changes and send photographs and other documentation (if available) to demonstrate compliance.
3. Together the ANFT Trail Certification Program Coordinator and the Trail Consultant will update and revise the original Trail Assessment. We anticipate that at this point you will become eligible for official status, as a Designated Forest Therapy Trail. At this point, a designation fee of \$500 is due to ANFT before the certification process can be finalized.

**Next Steps:**

For more information or to be connected to a local ANFT Trail Consultant, please contact Christine Hoyer, ANFT Trail Certification Program Consultant, at [trails@anft.earth](mailto:trails@anft.earth).