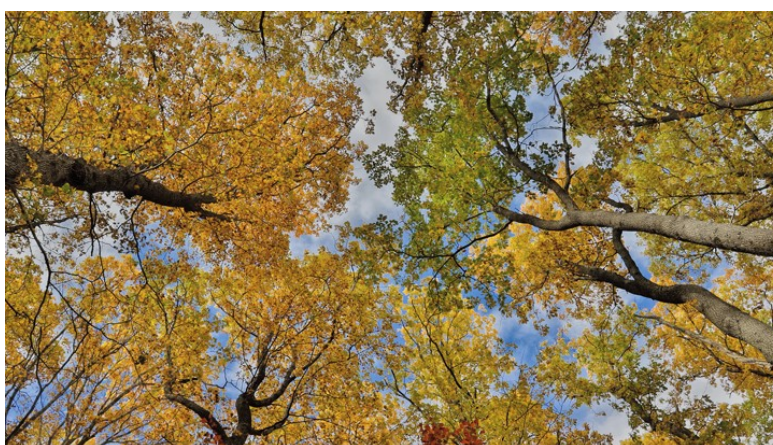


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What elements and characteristics should forests have to influence human health?



Despite the increasing interest of the scientific community and society towards the potential of forests as a source of human health, the existing scientific literature does not allow for a coherent relationship between the forest type and different health variables. This follows from a study led by ICTA-UAB researcher Albert Bach recently published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* where a systematic review of the existing scientific literature was conducted in order to determine what characteristics a forest should have to generate impact on human health.

The role of forests on human health has been widely addressed by the scientific community, providing evidence on the benefits of exposure to these ecosystems. Currently, health objectives are starting to become integrated into national and international forest strategies, management plans and policies. However, studies identifying the mechanisms by which forest characteristics can induce these effects on human health are still scarce.

The ICTA-UAB study, carried out in collaboration with researchers from CREAM, the UAB

Department of Geography, the Forest Science and Technology Center of Catalonia (CTFC) and the Hospital d'Olot, analyses what level of description of forests is collected in existing studies on human health, as well as which possible relationships between forest variables and health effects can be established.

According to the results, previous studies show a high heterogeneity in forest description, and highlight a lack of unified criteria in the analysis of the most basic characteristics, such as forest types, species composition or forest age. In fact, about 20% of the articles reviewed lacked any parameter. Despite the scientific evidence of the effects of forests on health, the study has not been able to identify any element or characteristic of forests as a determinant of these benefits. In addition, it has not been possible to establish any relationship between the most basic level of description of a forest (the forest type) and the three most studied health variables: blood pressure, pulse rate and cortisol levels.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes the need to generate new data and research that allows relating forest elements and characteristics with human health variables. Given the high heterogeneity of forest description, the author encourages scholars to incorporate more accurate specifications of forest variables in order to continue advancing in this field, thereby generating an integrated vision of the forest-health binomial to provide tools for forest management and the potential use of these habitats for preventive medicine and clinical practice guidelines.

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