

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed April 21, 1933

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FOREST AIR

Forest air is often credited with health-giving properties, which are explained in various ways. It was once generally supposed that the action of leaves in absorbing carbon dioxide and exhaling oxygen made the air of the forest more healthful. It now appears, however, that the amount of oxygen thus provided is insignificant in proportion to the needs of human respiration, besides being largely offset by the increased amount of carbon dioxide due to the decay of organic matter in the forest litter.

The belief that the air about pines and other conifers is beneficial to consumptives has prevailed for ages. As long ago as the days of the Caesars Roman physicians were wont to send consumptive patients to the pine woods. The well-known odor of such trees is due to a volatile oil, allied to turpentine, contained in their leaves, and some justification of the belief above mentioned appears to be found in the fact that turpentine, even in minute quantities, stimulates the action of the phagocytes, or white blood-corpuscles, which devour bacteria.

Whether or not pine forests exercise the special effects attributed to them, it is certain that the air of forests in general is relatively free from dust and from the microbes of disease. Observations in one locality showed the number of bacteria of all kinds in the atmosphere of a forest to be only from one-twentieth to one-thirtieth the number found on its outskirts.

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