

Speech

**“The healing forest as a therapeutic agent.
Experiences from Mecklenburg-Vorpommern from a
political perspective”**

by the State Secretary of the
Ministry of Economics, Employment and Health
of the State of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern,
Dr Stefan Rudolph

on the occasion of the
3rd International Congress
“Forest and its Potential for Health”

on 9 October 2019, 6:40 pm
in the Palau de Congressos de Girona
(Catalonia, Spain)

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Dear **Ministers**,

dear **State Secretaries**, dear colleagues,

dear **local politicians**,

dear **congress organisers**,

dear **friends**,

ladies and gentlemen,

thank you very much for your kind invitation and such a friendly reception from you here in Girona.

Estoy muy feliz de estar aquí.

Es un honor para mí, hablar con ustedes.

Muchas gracias!

Address,

I would like to speak to you today about the subject:

“The healing forest as a therapeutic agent. Experiences from Mecklenburg-Vorpommern from a political perspective”.

But before I do, please allow me to congratulate equally all citizens, as well as the officers of the ciudad Girona, on the great honour granted to your city by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. You are the second Spanish municipality to have ever been awarded the highly-respected **Europe Prize**.

Girona won the prize for its outstanding services in propagating the idea of European unification.

Congratulations!

And I would also like to congratulate you on the numerous **sporting calling cards of your city**.

The name Girona has been taken around the world by many people, including the footballers:

- **Férran Coromina** and
- **Àngel Martínez Cervera** such as

by the cycling legend:

- **José Antonio Escudero.**

Some famous sportspeople also come from my Federal States, on the Baltic Sea coast in the north east of Germany, such as

- The stroke of the German rowing eight,
Hannes Ocik,
- the cyclist
Stefan Nimke or
- **Toni Kroos**, our footballer in the German national team, who currently plays in Spain. But your football god, FC Barcelona, won the last two matches against this team.

Congratulations!

Address,

Why am I mentioning all this?

I am mentioning all this to make clear from the beginning how very **similar we all are**.

We all speak and think in the most varied languages of our planet.

But in our words, in our thoughts and in our actions, we speak one **common language**:

- the language **of togetherness**,
- the language **of mutual respect**,
- the language **of discipline and willpower**,
- the language **of clear goals**,
- the language **of partnership**.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is something **wonderful**.

Because it is in our own hands, our great project, to understand the **healing forest as a therapeutic agent** and on the one hand, view it **as one of the decisive and sustainable supports** for the protection of our climate, and on the other hand, to retain and regain our health.

Address,

Is there a more **honourable task**? I don't think so. Which is why I am proud to be able to be with you today, to speak to you. Thank you for your time.

Address,

So far, at this 3rd International Congress “**Forest and its Potential for Health**”, we have already heard much that is new, seen some great pictures and have experienced some remarkable results from scientific studies.

Keywords have included:

- The forest **as a place of peace**.
- The forest **as nature's gym**.
- The forest **as a natural pharmacy**.
- The forest **as a therapeutic agent**.

And you may have been with us yesterday on the “**Forest Field Trip**”, in the impressive volcanic zone of La Garrotxa. Or in the area of woodland that the congress organisers of Selvans want to use as a healing forest in the future – in a region that is just as imposing, and that is not called “**La Selva**”, “the primeval forest”, for nothing.

We, too, in what I believe to be the most beautiful federal state of the Federal Republic of Germany, with approximately 2,000 km of Baltic Sea coast, more than 2,000 lakes and 558,000 hectares of forest, have a natural basis for a **north east German “La Selva”**.

Address,

our forests,

- which were a place of **refuge and safety** for thousands of years,
- which facilitate both our **physical and mental well-being** and
- which for us today can be literally a **natural supplement to established therapy methods**,

are the focus of our 3rd convention.

In view of this congress, I believe:

We're at the **beginning of a new age!**

The well-known use of the forest for well-being, coupled with a therapeutic effect, is currently experiencing a new phase, the **phase of scientific substantiation**.

And at the same time, we are becoming **more aware** of the importance of our forests to our **global climate**, and that **with a new quality**.

And precisely this approach, ladies and gentlemen, namely **a consciously structured and sustainably oriented togetherness** between the sectors:

- **environment,**
- the **economy** and
- **health**

will contribute to this new quality, supported by a **de-emotionalised and scientifically confirmed climate debate.**

And new, scientifically substantiated and innovative prevention and convalescence programmes have proven that it does **not need a reflex reaction nor exclusively only advanced medicine and large pharmaceutical corporations** to protect people against illnesses or even to heal them. With the forest and its certification as a healing forest we can succeed in making a valuable contribution to **building up a holistic health system.**

We are also working tirelessly on this in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

What is our **goal**?

Our goal is to understand the forest so well that we know why and how the forest **as a scientifically established therapeutic agent** works, meaning a therapy you can also be prescribed by the doctor.

This use of the healing forest as a therapeutic agent must not be a **question of the money** our citizens have, but should depend exclusively on scientific, evidence-based studies.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is not trivial.

And please let me take a look at a broader perspective in addition, and to do so as a representative of the only combined ministry of economics and health in Germany.

If we want to be heard long-term and want to acquire partners, we have to **consciously think holistically!**

And that means we must not **overlook the necessary economic cycles.**

That means alongside health participants, the recipients of benefits, we also have to keep in mind the **providers of benefits**:

- the **convalescence clinics**,
- the forest **owners**,
- the **municipalities** and
- just as much the future **highly-qualified healing forest therapists**, who should also be able to earn their livings in real terms with their new work.

Address,

in overall economic terms, the **health sector** plays a disproportionate role in creating our prosperity in my federal state.

One in seven euros of **gross value added** in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is generated in the health sector.

One in five regular **employees** in my federal state works in the health sector.

And so we are not acting **selflessly** here.

The designation of healing forests will **further strengthen the health sector**.

And if we also want to retain holistic health provision tomorrow, we have to consider **new aspects**, consider **new products**, that are **sustainable and unspoilt** today. And that is precisely what we are doing with our certified healing forests.

Address,

we have to understand that the **healing forest as a therapeutic agent** will continue to gain in importance in the future, particularly in a time in which the **urbanisation** of our populations continues to grow unchecked.

It is well-known that **city dwellers** in particular have long sought places ideally suited to

- **stress-reducing leisure activities,**
- **sport,**
- **promoting health** and
- **retaining health.**

May I also remind you of the rapid development of the **forest bathing movement** from Japan.

But **our concept goes beyond forest bathing. We are consciously setting focal points that go further, supported by scientific studies that will be drawn up, and this for different indications and a “healing forest economic cycle” that brings prosperity.**

And our **children** also provide good arguments in favour of our healing forests.

Studies show that an increasing distance of the home from play areas with plants and larger areas of forests is associated with a **rise in:**

- **general illness,**
- **chronic illnesses** such as
- **a raised risk of developmental disorders**

in children.

One important therapeutic benefit of certified forests also seems to be promoting physical activity in our children, thus **preventing obesity** and other illnesses **associated with a lack of exercise.**

Which is why the Heringsdorf municipality in our federal state is now also increasingly backing the power of the healing forest in the area of **children's health** with the goal of establishing a holistic range of tourism services. We are wholeheartedly carrying out **Europe-wide pioneering work** for our adults of tomorrow.

For which I am very grateful to the Heringsdorf municipality.

Address,

my words should give you a strong sense of **hope for the future**.

We also had hope for the future in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern back in 2012, during the National Health Sector Conference, which my federal state hosts for Germany every year.

Under the motto “**Experiencing health!**” and together with our partner country, Austria, we looked at aspects concerning subject-relevant, cross-sector cooperation for the first time. I am very pleased that our friend, the healing forest pioneer of Austria and ambassador for the distinguished Krems University of Applied Science, **Heinz Boyer**, is contributing to the congress here. Dear Heinz, thank you!

Seven years ago now we had thought about “**Healthy living and holistic health concepts**” – and took a look at the forest to do so – from the very beginning on the **common ground** between:

- **politics,**
- **the economy and**
- **science.**

And here, ladies and gentlemen, is the **key to success**.

Establishing and maintaining healing forests has to become a **task for our civil societies**. This is the only way we will be able to achieve sustainability.

Politics, the economy and science are the three most important **catalysts for our worldwide healing forests project**:

- **not against each other,**
- **not in parallel to each other,**
- **but together.**

One result of our work is the **first healing forest in Europe**, which we have created in the popular tourist destination, Heringsdorf on the island of Usedom, and have designated it **according to**:

- **scientific,**
- **economic and**
- **state developed**

criteria for the first time.

Over 30,000 guests in the first year stated they had come to the region because of the healing forest.

And an additional 14 municipalities in our north east German region are currently applying to set up a **healing forest**, or in

contrast, a **spa forest** and to create the necessary pre-conditions for this.

We have placed a great emphasis from the beginning on delineating **different quality levels of forest use** from each other in the cascade:

- **recreational forest**,
- **spa forest** and
- **healing forest**.

Thus, as early as our first international congress, we defined the recreational forest, the spa forest and the healing forest:

- the ***recreational forest*** as a forest area that due to a variety of properties is suitable for providing a recreational effect and taking life at a slower pace,
- the ***spa forest*** as a forest area that due to a variety of properties is suitable for providing a wide-ranging health-promoting effect,
- the ***healing forest*** as a forest area that due to a variety of properties and on a scientific basis is suitable for use for special indications as a therapeutic agent.

Here, the recipients of benefits are accompanied by highly-qualified **healing forest therapists**, who target influencing the way people deal with illnesses and favourably influencing the degree of impairment.

The treatment can relieve chronic illnesses.

In my opinion, **without highly-qualified healing forest therapists there would hardly be any targeted healing forests.**

Address,

on our way to the healing forest we and the Heringsdorf municipality have learned a great deal.

It was quickly clear to us: forests have considerable **potential to promote public health and prevent illness** in Europe and, of course, throughout the world.

And we have the potential to make something out of this.

And we are making something out of this.

On the one hand, as already mentioned, we have established the first healing forest in Europe, whose driving force is **Dr. Karin Lehmann**.

On the other hand, we have set **clear responsibilities**, so that **all the activities** of our federal state to establish and maintain healing forests are **coordinated**.

Our **forest law** has been supplemented by Parliament with **delegated legislation**, which allows the competent ministers to designate appropriate forests as spa forests or healing forests by issuing an official order.

The state government has also provided plenty of money for the necessary **forest and medical reports**, as well as to build up an organised and high-quality **training and further education pathway to qualify as a healing forest therapist**.

Other German federal states, such as **Bavaria** and **Rhineland-Palatinate**, have taken up our ideas.

Rhineland-Palatinate is currently working on updating its forest law with a new focal point, namely also **already codifying the requirements for a healing forest in law**.

The initiator here is the town of **Lahnstein** in Rhineland-Palatinate, with its municipal leader Mayor **Peter Labonte**.

Address,

we are noticing great interest worldwide.

We were in **Bulgaria** recently, in a few weeks' time we will be in **Vietnam** again, there are currently enquiries from **Serbia**.

There is great national and international interest in establishing healing forests everywhere.

We will be pleased to **share our experiences and to cooperate**.

In 2018, we founded the “**International Society of Forest Therapy (ISFT)**”, as a specialist international healing forest society, in Krems (Lower Austria), with experts from the around the world. This encompasses a network oriented specifically on **scientifically based research to apply the health promoting opportunities offered by forests** – not in competition but as a qualitative supplement that creates

benefits in addition to the existing forest therapy organisations.

We were only able to convene yesterday due to the outstanding conditions offered by this Congress as a specialist society and co-organiser of the Congress. In the process, the worldwide members from **Europe, Asia, the USA and South America** elected **Professor Dr Horst Klinkmann** as the President of the specialist society.

The source of the ideas for considerations about healing forests, my friend and teacher, Professor Dr Horst Klinkmann, will subsequently report to you about the **“International Society of Forest Therapy”**.

Professor Dr Horst Klinkmann put this topic on the political agenda of my federal state in 2012, thus also putting it on the **European agenda** at least.

Ladies and gentlemen,

today, we have the opportunity to show Professor Dr Horst Klinkmann our thanks and our respect together,

- for his **vision**,
- for his **professionalism** and
- for his **scientific rigour**.

Dear Professor Klinkmann,

that is your applause!

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am of one opinion with Prof. Horst Klinkmann. Despite many more hopeful initial scientific findings, the **scientific and evidence-based studies available on the health effects of forests absolutely have to be broadened and improved**.

This can only be achieved by joining forces – and it would be best if we combined the **knowledge of the world**.

The “International Society of Forest Therapy”, whose founding members also include the organisers of this Congress, “**Selvans**”, sees this ambitious target as its obligation.

And put jokingly, we will not have access to **more knowledge than the knowledge of the world**, for the foreseeable future at least.

So within the “International Society of Forest Therapy” we would like **more research**, including:

- on the **dose-effect relationship** or in addition,
- for which **indications which forest therapy measures are most promising** or
- how **healing forests** can have the best effect in the **prevention of and convalescence from illnesses**.

And we would also like **long-term studies** about the long-term health effects of stays in healing forests.

So I would like to ask you:

- to help design the pathway,
- let us create promising **study designs** together,
- let us acquire suitable scientists,
- let us see which international institutions are the right contacts to **finance such best case global studies** and
- let us send a **clear signal to Brussels** from this year's Congress in the ancient city of Girona to be allowed to use the new "operational programmes" and their financial resources directly to implement healing forests and to take the necessary measures.

My federal state is concretely placing the aspect of healing forests in our "operational programmes".

I would like to ask all **member states of the European Union** to work towards this as well.

The State Government of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is offering its capabilities to campaign in Brussels for finance for appropriate projects.

Address,

we need quick, **concrete results**.

Because only then will

- **the health insurers,**
- **the state pension schemes and**
- **other health funding agencies**

also be prepared to pay **benefits prescribed by doctors** in terms of a healing forest as a therapeutic agent.

Address,

together, we can **identify** suitable forest areas worldwide and **certify** them as healing forests.

We will establish a “**Healing Forest Certification Office**” in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. And beyond this, I suggest considering the establishment of an **international certification office** under the auspices of the “International Society of Forest Therapy”.

Together, we have to create standards for certified forests and in addition, **internationalise the curriculum for the training and further education of highly-qualified healing forest therapists.**

But please allow me to raise a small objection to my words at the beginning of this speech.

Maybe we're not at the **beginning of our movement** at all?

Maybe we're already **right in the middle!**

Take a look around. In the rows in front and behind you, as well as possibly sitting right next to you, you'll find certain people you have already seen or got to know at previous international congresses about the "health potential of forests".

I am really **proud** that this congress, which is now taking place for the third time in Girona this year, began in my federal state.

In 2017, we were the **hosts** and apparently also the **initiators** for many people who enter into regular dialogue on this topic for the future.

I like to look back at the beginnings – and see in retrospect a great development of this congress especially and its topics in particular.

And even before this congress in Girona comes to an end tomorrow evening, I'd like to call on you to support our friends from **Portugal** – with whom we have been associated since 2015 thanks to the National Health Sector Conference – in the preparations for our fourth congress in **2020**.

Let us talk about the latest developments again; and in particular, about what results or ideas have emerged from scientific studies.

Allow me, on behalf of everyone, I'm sure, to say a most sincere **thank you to the extremely dedicated organisers of this congress**, on your behalf in particular to Mr **Jaume Hidalgo i Colomé**, Vice President **David Merino i Parcet** and Treasurer **Stefan Esser** from Selvans, who have organised this extremely inspiring gathering here in Girona. **A true masterpiece!**

Thank you!

I would also like to thank the **co-organisers**:

- the **University of Girona** and
- the **European Network for Nature Conservation**, “Xarxa pro a la Conservació de la Natura”.

Address,

I would like to cordially invite all of you to our **north German “La Selva”** and to discover our healing forests in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern for yourselves.

And please try not forget the beginning of my speech today either:

*“In our words, in our thoughts and in our actions, we speak one **common language**:*

- *the language **of togetherness**,*
- *the language **of mutual respect**,*
- *the language **of discipline and willpower**,*
- *the language **of clear goals**,*
- *the language **of partnership**.*

**Apreciadas Señoras y Señores,
queridos colegas,
queridos amigos,**

gracias por su hospitalidad y nos vemos en Portugal.

Muchas gracias!