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Lonely carnage abounds in Japan's 'suicide forest'

By VBS.TV staff

November 4, 2010 3:48 p.m. EDT

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Bodies abound in 'suicide forest'

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

The Aokigahara Forest is Japan's most popular suicide destination

Lush, expansive land is the final resting place for 50-100 people a year

Geologist patrols the land, discovering bodies and counseling at-risk people

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Editor's note: The staff at CNN.com has been intrigued by the journalism of VICE, an independent media company and website based in Brooklyn, New York. VBS.TV is Vice's broadband television network. The reports, which are produced solely by VICE, reflect a transparent approach to journalism, where viewers are taken along on every step of the reporting process. We believe this unique reporting approach is worthy of sharing with our CNN.com readers.

Brooklyn, New York (VBS.TV) -- At the foot of Mount Fuji, in the Chubu region of Japan, a lush and expansive forest named Aokigahara sits dauntingly. Local residents are told from an early age to avoid it altogether, as its sheer volume leaves little question that a curious youngster will be unable to find his or her way out of thickets that have become synonymous with a dark mythology.

Though the area has served as a respite for the peaceful elderly suicides of yore, today it has devolved into the country's ultimate destination of despondent citizens suffering under the pressures of Japan's notoriously driven and achievement-based culture. Aokigahara is now the site of 50 to 100 suicides each year.

Earlier this year, VBS contacted Azusa Hayono, a geologist who for more than 30 years has patrolled Aokigahara studying the land, serving as an environmental conservationist and stumbling upon the not infrequent dead body. A sweet, conscientious and demure man, it is strange to consider the amount of solitary carnage he has encountered. He's come to act as a sort of counselor to the many people he finds contemplating death along Aokigahara's pathways.

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As he led us into Aokigahara, so creepily scored with the echo of birds and crackling brush, the idea that Azusa was sane at all seemed almost impossible. That we'd find a dead body, to us at least, was entirely possible -- so much so that when we did in fact stumble on what Azusa judged as a suicide from at least a year before, and were left staring at the decomposed corpse, we were shocked it hadn't happened sooner.

Over the course of our time with Azusa, this eerie side of Japanese culture came into clearer focus. He explained to us the numerous ways its citizenry is called on to excel -- and how the subsequent feelings of inadequacy mislead and often overwhelm. It paints a sweeping and telling portrait that a sole stretch of forest, born centuries before in the wake of a volcanic eruption, could come to represent to so many the only way of escaping the ways and pressures and apparent failures of an entire nation.

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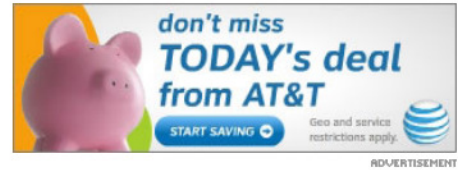
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