



WRITTEN BY ~ HANNAH RAE
Hunting Feels Good



Of course hunting is good for us - but why?

We all know the feeling of needing to “get some fresh air” or put on our pack and “blow off some steam”. It was highlighted for us last year when lockdown left the hunting population of NZ trapped like ill-tempered rats stuck in our respective cages. The fact that the Red stag roar and the Wapiti ballots were about to kick off served to truly exacerbate the issue.

Every one of us says “*hunting is good for me*”. We know it intuitively, we know we feel good being out in the hills - stretching the legs, breaking a sweat, seeing animals amongst fantastic scenery, and soaking up some vitamin D. But what is it exactly that makes it so good for us?

I went another round with a case of cabin fever earlier this year, suffering a broken foot in February. This, plus the lingering ligament damage, kept me out of action for so long it put my own sanity, and the sanity of those around me, in jeopardy. **Thus, with a lot more time on my hands I began to explore how hunting supports our mental wellbeing, and why it feels so tragic when the option of getting out in the hills is stripped away from us.**

Exercise, and the feel-good endorphins produced as a result, is the most obvious

factor. **But as I scratched beyond the surface I discovered there's a lot more to it than that.** I came to realise that what I missed the most was the type of “realignment” that comes from being out in wild places. The way society is constructed and the way we live today, we are very much removed from the natural rhythm of life, with light, food, heat, and entertainment all available at our fingertips. I needed, and had come to rely on, hunting adventures to remind me not to take these things for granted.

Digging into the science produced some more answers as to why spending time in the great outdoors is good for us, our mental wellbeing in particular. I also spoke with Tui Keenan of ‘Hunting with Tui’, and Willie Duley of ‘NZ Hunter Adventures’, to glean insight from their hunting experiences.

The use of the natural world as a healing tool is growing in popularity throughout the globe. In Scandinavia the concept of forest schools has been embedded for several decades. The Japanese have re-invigorated the idea of forest bathing, with parts of the Western world subsequently jumping on that bandwagon, and ecotherapy centres have been established in the rolling green hills of Scotland. Time in the outdoors has become part of some prescribed therapy for PTSD, and Nature Deficit Disorder has been identified as one of the latest maladies of the increasingly indoor-bound human race.

We've all seen the headlines touting the benefits of sunshine and fresh air. And we know that even just bringing a nature scene to mind - a stream trickling through a beech forest, tussock-laden open ridgetops, or crashing waves and salty ocean air - our breathing deepens, shoulders relax, and we can feel a little more at ease. The science behind the relationship between our wellbeing and spending time outdoors offers a heavy hitting list of benefits: it lowers blood pressure and resting heart rate, reduces muscle tension and the production of stress hormones, it improves memory, calms our nervous system, enhances our



Tui Marama-Keenan

NATURE & NGAHERE AS THERAPY

It turns out the importance of the outdoors and the ngahere had come into Tui's awareness

immune system, and lifts our mood. If someone put all of that in a single pill there's no arguing that every one of us would be scrambling for it.

Even relatively small 'doses' have a great effect. Research shows that people who spend 120 minutes per week in nature, spaced out or all at once, are “substantially more likely to report good health and psychological well-being than those who don't.” It also demonstrated that two hours was a pretty strict boundary, anything less than that showed minimal benefit. This indicates to me that perhaps it should no longer be considered a leisure activity or luxury, and instead be promoted as essential to our humanity. No wonder it felt like the sky was falling when simply getting to the mailbox was tricky during my first weeks on crutches!

in recent months too. For her, the pre-game to just going on a day hunt can be stressful - making sure work priorities are taken care of, getting home life (husband and five daughters!) organised, gear packed, and the rush of an early morning. When we have opportunities like this to get some fresh air and clear the mind, we don't want to be spending half the time worrying about things that concern our home or work life. Tui shared an idea for fast-tracking the process of switching our brain off, a ritual she has adopted courtesy of Sam the trap man. **She suggests that taking a moment to wash our hands in the first water source we come to, and even splashing the water over our face, serves as a trigger to reset.** It can also be an acknowledgement, a practise in gratitude, as we enter nature. I tried this myself on a recent overnight

trip - there was a thigh-deep river crossing first up. While I was too chicken to inflict brain freeze with an icy water face splash, I did dip my fingers in the river and hope that the glacial-fed current was enough to wash away everything weighing on my mind.

Since her introduction to hunting several years ago, Tui has come to realise she relies on the ngahere as a form of therapy. **“It's teaching me that I can be present, and I can be calm in my busy environment. Now I know that it is possible.”** She makes an interesting point from her own experience that I'm sure can be applied almost universally. We make an effort to get ourselves physically fit for hunting by doing some form of regular training, yet we do nothing regularly to improve our minds. **“There's something wrong with that equation,”** she said.

In the modern world we are encouraged to look for the fastest solution, the tick-box criteria to meet, or process to complete in order to “fix” ourselves. But the outdoors works on a totally different level to clinical mental support, and it can be an important and free tool to help with whatever is going on in our lives. From Tui's experience it seems we don't really need to “do” anything, just “be” out there, become immersed in the experience, and let nature do the rest.



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PERSPECTIVE & RESILIENCE

I had a feeling Willie would have an interesting take on the relationship hunters have with the outdoors, especially given his extensive experience and the fact that his job is intertwined with it. He didn't disappoint.

Willie's theory on life is that we all need something to live for, a passion to work for during the week. But is hunting still as good for you when it is your job? He admits that on a filming trip he's unable to completely switch off. Whether it's managing a group and route, planning video shots, thinking about storyline, there will always be something on his mind. He's learned to deeply relish those times when the cameras are off and to intentionally enjoy the moment. That said, he's still certain the benefits far outweigh the cost.

There are two themes that arose from my conversation with Willie about how hunting supports our mental wellbeing, the first being perspective. He highlights how it removes us from our day-to-day routine and its associated stress, by forcing us to focus on what actually matters at any given moment - whether that's looking for an animal, climbing that next hill, or

finding shelter before the rain sets in. As Willie said, *"The weather doesn't care about all those emails you're supposed to send."* It gives us the opportunity to give our minds a break from all the little things we fret about at home, and remind ourselves what factors are actually critical to our fulfilment and survival. He has also come to enjoy and appreciate the downtime, especially during summer. *"You can actually talk about stuff with your mates - family, relationships, life, dreams. You might not solve anything but it's always good to get it off your chest."*

The second theme is resilience. Often in hunting we put ourselves through a certain element of suffering - tackling a big climb with our heavy pack, navigating challenging terrain, and enduring atrocious weather conditions - colloquially known as type-2 fun. Willie recognises that in order to keep pushing onwards, to continue putting one foot in front of the other, we are pushing mental barriers all the time. This builds resilience. It's the same resilience that we can then use when we encounter challenges in our normal lives, things like stressful work projects, relationship struggles, the chaos of a pandemic, financial instability and illness.

As my injury heals and I'm on track to being 100% operational again, I've been trying to get out into wild-ish places for my recommended weekly dose of nature. It started with a brew by the lake and long drives up river flats to glass; now it's short, mildly adventurous outings, and soon I'll be back in the real backcountry again. It's great to be armed with the knowledge and awareness of all the benefits that come from spending time outside - being present, absorbing nature's inherent healing, gaining perspective, and building resilience. The challenge is how can we maximise these benefits, and more importantly, bring them back with us into our everyday lives? I'm still figuring out what that looks like for me. **But I'd also like to see you take on this challenge for yourself; as well as meat, stinky gear, or a trophy head, what are you going to bring home from your next hunting trip?**

