n a cold Wednesday morning in early August in Tokomaru, population 552, six women gathered around the back of a ute belonging to Pania Tepaiho-Marsh. In the thick dirt of the rear window, someone had written “Wahine Toa Hunting”. The women were introduced, they hugged, they talked and they laughed loudly. Then they were driven to a nearby farm to learn how to shoot.

A .308 rifle is a large and violent firearm. Even fitted with a suppressor, as Tepaiho-Marsh’s were, the sound is intimidating and the kick potentially injurious. Unimpeded, a round from a .308 can travel several kilometres. The women were understandably nervous. The first woman lay down and picked up the gun, then said, “Can someone who’s fired a gun before go first?”

“No,” Tepaiho-Marsh replied. “You’re going first.”

She had predicted this would happen. She’d seen it hundreds of times before. One day earlier, she’d said: “In the truck, they’ll be freaking out. They’ll be like, ‘Uh! Uh! Uh!’ freaking out. They’ll wind the window up and down. I’ll be like, ‘Stay still, you’re fine. Chill out, I’ve got you.’”

One by one, the women lay down with the rifle and shot two rounds at some cans in front of some white plastic. The cans were destroyed, the white plastic was torn to shreds, dirt from the barn behind the target was flung into the air and raised down around them. One by one, the women literally jumped up and down, whooping, laughing, hugging, swearing. The change in them was immediate and it was physical.

She had predicted this too. “Once they shoot the rifle, such a heavy calibre, their mauri and their mana — because a lot of them are coming to me and they’re quite lost — once they shoot that rifle and they know they can handle it and that power behind it and that they can control such power in such an elegant way, their mauri is just: ‘Boo!’ They turn into Tupac.”

To one of the women, who couldn’t stop smiling, Tepaiho-Marsh said: “How do you feel now? Like a f*** en boss bitch?”

The woman replied: “There’s not enough words in any dictionary to emphasise how f*** en mean that was.”

“It’s not hunting,” Tepaiho-Marsh says. “It’s just building these women’s mana back up.”

Wahine Toa Hunting started three years ago. Tepaiho-Marsh responded to a Facebook comment from a woman wanting to learn how to hunt, offering to teach her. That comment got a few likes and comments, so she made a short video asking if any other women wanted to learn. That video received 2,500 views.

The Wahine Toa Hunting Facebook page now has 52,000 followers and is growing rapidly. Tepaiho-Marsh’s videos routinely get tens of thousands of views and often into the hundreds of thousands.

More than 3,000 women have their names on the waiting list to spend a weekend learning to hunt with her; “I said the waiting list was seven to eight years,” she says, “but really I’m gonna have to die and come back and then start teaching again.”

She charges the women nothing and gets no funding. She doesn’t want money. People have offered her money, sometimes thousands of dollars, to take them out and she has always said no. “I have no emotional attachment to money,” she says. “It means absolutely nothing. I’ve been poor poor — homeless poor. I don’t give a s*** about money.”

She says: “This is my purpose. You don’t charge for your purpose.”

She says: “I don’t give it a f***. If I spend my last $1,000 doing this, I don’t care.”

She says: “The one thing that seems to f*** everyone over is greed.”

Her father, who killed himself when she was 12, used to say: “Your integrity can be sold but it can’t be bought back.”

She grew up in Porirua, where she struggled in school, was frequently called “useless”, got in a lot of fights and became what she calls “an entitled hood-rat little bitch”. She has been seriously depressed, on welfare and in toxic relationships. She has been cold, hungry and homeless.

She says she grew up urbanised, disconnected from the land. “Even though I learned Maori — I was in immersion, all of that — I was still so disconnected from the main core of Maoridom, which is our whenua.”

When her husband Haaka, a former army rifleman, taught her to hunt, that started to change.

“I never realised how much I was missing that connection, because I never knew. Until I was out there with my husband and I was like, ‘I feel actually really calm here. I feel at peace.’ Because I suffer from real bad depression, so it was such a calming thing.

“When you’re there, you have to focus on what you’re doing. You have firearms, you’re hunting for food to fill your freezer, and you have to focus on that, which means you’re at one with Papaturamu, you’re at one with Tane Mahuta. It silences everything else.”

Whenever she is hunting, she says, she takes a minute to think about her tupuna, who were doing the same thing here hundreds of years ago. She says: “It’s awokeen a part of me that I never knew was asleep.”

“When she started Wahine Toa Hunting, she thought it would be a practical thing; teach women to hunt in order to fill their freezers with thousands of dollars of free meat so they could keep their families fed and that would be the end of it.

I started realising how much urbanised people don’t have the core of sisterhood, don’t have the real hearty friends, don’t have that around them.”

“But what I started to learn was it was just having such a knock-on effect. I started realising how much urbanised people don’t have the core of sisterhood, don’t have the real hearty friends, don’t have that around them.”

After rifle training, she drove them up into the bush-covered hills near Shannon, half an hour south of Palmerston North. Ria Hall’s song Owner came on. Tepaiho-Marsh said she thought she’d use it as the background music for the video she would make about this hunt.

The song began:

No one owns the water
No one owns the land
No one owns the oceans
No one owns the air

These are given by our mother
The planet provides for free
Only at the hands of the greedy
Does the earth require a fee

Tepaiho-Marsh said: “For me the real true payment is tino rangatiratanga, the intergenerational tino rangatiratanga, where you teach kids, you teach friends. Just keep it going, keep everyone who was once me, urbanised, back into the bush, back into the whenua.”
The women had only walked a few hundred metres into the bush when they heard a stag roar. They stopped still, pointing their rifles in its direction, waiting for signs of movement. There wasn’t any. After a while, Tepaiho-Marsh said it didn’t sound close. They walked on. Half an hour or so later, another roar — louder this time. Again they stopped. Again, it wasn’t close. She said it was probably kilometres away across the valley and what they were hearing was its echo bouncing around the hills. They walked for another half hour or so but that was the last sign of a deer or any animal at all.

The day was gloomy and it was getting late. They headed back to the ute, to make sure they could reach the hut with plenty of time before dark.

They drove down out of the hills and pulled up on the side of a dirt road, surrounded by dense bush. “We’re here,” she said, getting out of the truck and plunging into a small gap in the bush from which a track led 50m or so down the hill. At its end was an incredible 120-year-old timber hut, overlooking a stream.

They lit the fire, spread bread rolls, salad and seafood on the table, cracked some beers, and sat around in the old armchairs on the small deck outside.

On a pan in the fireplace, Tepaiho-Marsh cooked some venison back steaks marinated in teriyaki. “It would cost about $80 for this in the supermarket — when you can get it,” she said.

For the next 10 or so hours, they talked. The subjects included suicide, abuse, rape, assault, homelessness, hunger and trauma: specifically unhealed trauma; specifically intergenerational trauma. Throughout, though, the dominant sound was laughter.

Late that night, Tepaiho-Marsh told a story about how, as a child, hungry and desperate, she would steal food from the deep freezers of houses around the neighbourhood, so she could feed herself and her younger siblings. She spoke of how, as an adult, she went back to one of these houses to apologise. She told them: “I used to steal from your freezer when I was a kid.” At that point in the story, her voice began to break.

She said the woman replied: “We know. We used to put food in there for you.”

That was the only time she cried.

A couple of years ago, she went into a youth prison to talk to the young women there. She knew she could easily have ended up where they were. She saw herself in them. She took some of them hunting and later adopted one of them. When Covid first hit, that daughter went hunting and shot two deer, the meat from which kept the family fed throughout that first lockdown.

Tepaiho-Marsh says: “Every time we’re eating it, I’m like, ‘You did this baby. You got our food’ and you can just see it, like: ‘You know it motherf***er?’” She laughs. “Bonne appetit, bitches! “Just seeing that — as a continuation of a maori boost — it just starts you off down that s***.”

On a visit to Auckland, she was struck by the fact most of the homeless people on Queen St were Māori but none of the people on the red carpet at Gucci were.

“It was like a snapshot of ‘what the f*** is wrong with our country?’” she says. “What I saw in: ‘This is your own whenua and you’re sitting there with f***ing s*** blankets. You don’t have any knowledge, you’re asking for money, you’re on your own whenua, and you don’t know how to go and get a Kai.’

“It’s all there. This whole place is a pūraka if you know what you’re looking for. It’s just no one gave them the knowledge to do it.”

Another time, she visited Wint, as an advocate for her cousin:

“We looked around the waiting room and they’re all Māori — and this is not just a Māori thing — but as a Māori, I was like: ‘No, no, no, no, no, this should not be like this. We are tangata whenua. This is our whenua. Why are we all in here asking for money? It doesn’t make any sense. The only thing that’s missing in this room
is knowledge — not a f***ing card that says, ‘Go and buy the milk.’ I thought: I’ll never be in here asking for a food grant because my freezer will never be empty ... I’ll be all right’ and that just sat on me. And I’m like, ‘F***, this is the beginning of the awakening.’”

She says non-Māori sometimes say to her: “Stop complaining. You’ve got it so easy. The Africans, they were fully stolen. Did you get stolen?”

“No,” she says, “But our f***en land did. Our culture did. This was almost not a thing anymore.” Institutional racism, she says, is acknowledged only by those who suffer from it. And interpersonal racism can be so low-level it can be hard to see if you’re not its subject.

Once, at an appointment when she was pregnant, she was asked: “Is the father still around?” The next woman, a Pākehā, was asked: “Are you married?”

Some racism, though, is not so subtle: When she started the Wahine Toa Hunting Facebook page, people would send her hate and even death threats. The first one read: “Put the rifle in your mouth and kill yourself you f***en n***** bitch.”

She says: “I had to learn that if I want to go into this business, that’s what you’re gonna get and you just have to block it out. I had to learn that’s their own s**t. This is nothing to do with me.”

Late last year, as the Wahine Toa Hunting waiting list ballooned, she realised she needed help. She found a brilliant young woman who understood and embraced the kaupapa.

On New Year’s Eve, as that young woman was preparing to start Wahine Toa Hunting in the Bay of Plenty, she took her own life. It was the latest in a line of suicides in Tepāho-Marsh’s life, dating back to the death of her father. In 2018, she lost a niece and a nephew.
Last year, she led ah ikoi, at which thousands of people marched on Parliament, demanding Government action on youth suicide. She says the majority of the messages that now arrive in the Wahine Toa Hunting inbox are not about hunting — they’re about suicide. “Some of the stuff is heartbreaking,” she says. “A lot of the time I don’t go in my inbox because I’m like, ‘Am I prepared to read what’s in there?’”

She says one man wrote: “I don’t think they would even care if I killed myself. I think they would only be annoyed because now they have to plan a tangi.”

She says she asks the people if they’re okay, asks how they’re feeling, tells them she’s listening if they want to talk: “I’m never too busy to talk if someone’s in that situation but also I have to prepare myself to go into that inbox, because it’s massive. “Men, teenagers, women: They just need a safe place where they don’t feel judged. The way I speak is very harsh, very blunt and no filter and I guess they feel like I don’t judge them, because I don’t. Like I said, I’m not a psychologist. In fact, I’m the opposite. Can I get one?”

“Ve always have our mana,” she says. “It just needs to be dusted off. When you grow up the way a lot of us grew up — in heavy trauma and s**** — your mauri and your mana gets smashed. You get told you ain’t s****. ‘You’re never gonna be nothing’... that’s your inner soundtrack. You need to change it.

WHERE TO GET HELP
If it is an emergency and you feel you or someone else is at risk, call 111. Otherwise talk to your GP or mental health provider or try these numbers

- Lifeline: 0800 543 354 (available 24/7)
- Suicide Crisis Helpline: 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO) (available 24/7)
- Youthline: 0800 376 633

“I know what it’s like to have to change that korero in your head, that you’re telling yourself constantly. Your level’s down here. But once you know you can handle a .308, that’s a beast f***en calibre rifle and then you have this whole new group of people that are on the same journey with you.”

The Wahine Toa Hunting waiting list might have spiralled out of control but she says she will never turn anyone away. “I might take years to get to them, she says, but she will do it. The rewards, she says, are too great.

“I could never turn around and say that’s enough,” she says. “It can never end.”

n the late morning on the second day, the women headed out into the bush for the last time. It was a warm day but it was cool in the bush. They didn’t come across any deer, pigs or goats; they saw no animals at all. There wasn’t even any birdsong. The bush was empty. They walked for an hour or so, then turned around and came back. They emerged into the sunlight, put out a blanket on a patch of grass and ate leftover bread rolls, chicken and salad. They talked about personal sovereignty, politics and the state of the country. They laughed a lot, then they headed for home.

Over the past two days, they’d spent maybe three hours hunting but many multiples of that talking. They hadn’t fired a single shot. They hadn’t even taken serious aim. The trip hadn’t been about hunting.

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