



# **Kapiti Fly Fishing Club**

## **May 2020 Newsletter**

**This month's photo: Tongariro River looking up-stream from Major Jones Bridge**

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***Club activities***

At this stage, the Committee will review the On-Water trips and provide an update in next month's newsletter.

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*Members have been sent an email to invite you to join members at this month's Club Meeting KFFC AGM 2019-20 via Zoom technology on Monday 25 May*

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**I would like to remind members that Sporting Life are our sponsor and you are encouraged to visit their website or contact them when you are next looking for a fly-fishing item to purchase, Graham will give you a generous discount as a club member.**

## President report

Well, fellow members, here we go, another AGM and a new club year. I just hope that this one goes a lot better than the last one ended and we have no more lockdowns!

It has been marvellous to have got some more freedom and I even managed to sneak to the river with Gordon Baker earlier this week. No fish were hooked, harmed, or landed however it was a cracker sunny and calm day and it was god for my soul. What could be better than a day like that wandering the river with a good mate. (Well, catching a fish would have helped but that would just have been a bonus). It looks like the fish have moved back country to do the boy/girl thing so for the next few months the Central Plateau will get more attention from me.

The great news is that we have a fantastic team for the committee and all of us are ready to make the coming year a great one.

Remember that if you have any ideas for club trips, just want to help or have ideas to make our club even better just contact any of the committee

A reminder for those who may not know, we also have an informal group of “mid weekers” who often get together for impromptu day trips. If you want to be part of the group, then let Hugh Driver or myself know and we will get you “on the list”.

I also see that we are getting a small contingent of members in my little town of Otaki so we must get together for a village coffee. I will make contact with you re this.

Let us hope we can have our June club meeting at the clubhouse. Now, that will be nice!

See you on Zoom for the AGM

That's it from me

Tight lines. (well actually I have been practising my slack line casting!)

Michael

**PROTECT OUR WATERWAYS**

**STOP THE SPREAD OF FRESHWATER PESTS**

- CHECK** Remove all plant material from items that have been in the water.
- CLEAN** Soak or scrub all items for at least one minute in a 5% solution of detergent.
- DRY** If cleaning is not practical, dry items completely and then leave for at least 48 hours.

See [www.biosecurity.govt.nz/cleaning](http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/cleaning) for more ways to Check, Clean, Dry. If you restrict your activity to a single waterway there is no need to Check, Clean, Dry.

New Zealand Government | Ministry for Primary Industries  
Ministry for Primary Industries  
Maukōwhiri Matua

## *Who is laughing now? by Simon Cooper - Life on a Chalkstream*

**For a while, the COVID-19 news felt a lot like the Foot & Mouth epidemic of 2001 (was it really that long ago ....); a gathering crisis that might, with a bit of luck, prove our worst fears unfounded. But Boris Johnson's announcement on Monday night, incidentally one of the most watched pieces of television in British history, dismantled that optimistically construction edifice.**

We'd gone from jokingly talking fishing up as the best form of self-isolation on Monday morning to hitting the phones on Tuesday to work out how best to pick our way through a landscape where fishing, if not explicitly banned, was the furthest thing from people's minds

As the saying goes, when people make plans, God laughs - I was so excited for the opening day. The winter rains have been amazing for the chalkstreams.

When I returned from my Hemingway pilgrimage the first thing I did, jaded and jet-lagged, was walk the rivers; I do miss them on extended trips away.

True, the banks are, and will remain for a while yet, a bit slosy but the streams are full to brimming. Crystal clear with gravel so bright it burnt my eyes on that sunny morning



**Spot four fish ...**

Now March is usually the month the rivers promise much but show little in the way of fish who hide away. But this time, after an exceptionally warm winter in which I recall no more frosts than I could count on the fingers of both hands, and daily hatches of tiny midges that are so voluminous you almost choke, the air and water was alive. The river was teeming with fish on the fin. Ready for action.

It is a bitter enough pill to swallow in the close season. But to know that involuntarily the close season might continue for a while yet .... well, I suspect the fish are laughing along with God.



## *Eat a Trout Once in a While by Domenick Swentosky*

I stood next to him on the bank, and I watched my uncle kneel in the cold riffle. Water nearly crested the tops of his hip waders while he adjusted and settled next to the flat sandstone rock that lay between us. He pulled out the Case pocketknife again, as he had done every other time that I had watched this fascinating process as a young boy.

“Hand me the biggest one,” my uncle said, with his arm outstretched and his palm up.

So, I looked deep into my thick canvas creel for the first trout I’d caught that morning. Five trout lay in the damp creel. I’d rapped each of them on the skull after beaching them on the bank, right between the eyes, just as I’d been taught — putting a clean end to a trout’s life. I handed the rainbow trout to my uncle and smiled with enthusiasm.

“He took my minnow right behind that dead-fall where we started this morning. Remember that?” I said. “You didn’t catch anything there!”

I wagged my finger toward my fishing mentor. And I felt proud that I, a ten-year-old boy, had out-fished my uncle, if just this once. Because in the creel around my shoulder were five trout to his three. Looking back, all these decades later, I realize that he probably led me toward each one of those trout. And he might have even sandbagged his own catch, just to make my day. Nevertheless, I felt like I had accomplished something special. And sure enough, I had.

My uncle smiled back. “That’s a good one,” he said, taking the semi-stiff trout in his own hand.

He turned it upside down and put his thumb through a gill plate. Then I watched him insert the pocketknife in the anal vent and slice through the white belly skin, all the way up to behind the jawbone. He made two quick slits under the neck and pushed the knife forward, making a clean exit above the bottom teeth. Next, he pushed his finger into the throat of the trout, and with one quick sweep rearward, all the organs fell from the body of my fish.

“Here,” my uncle said to me. And he handed to me a suddenly lighter trout. “Go ahead and clean out the blood line.”

I took the fish and slid my thumbnail along the inner spine of the trout, pushing away the dark, clotted blood in a parallel line from the bottom to the top of the fish. I saw my uncle nod with approval as I finished the job, rinsing the trout in the clear rippled water. Then he motioned for me to lay it on the flat rock. And I did.

We both stared at the fish, pausing as the moment pulled from within us a natural submission — humility and respect.

“Here. You try the next one,” he said. Reaching across his body, my uncle dug into his own canvas creel and revealed the biggest prize of the day. Then he handed me the trout and the knife together. And I gutted my first trout under his watch.



I am forty-four years old now. And I have repeated this teaching process with each of my young sons. I feel that I am handing down something important — something special to them. Their natural reverence for the routine is deep — same as mine was. They understand that taking a life is significant. And removing the vital organs from an animal teaches us, first-hand, the reality of what happens every time we eat meat, fish, or poultry.

Hunters understand this. But many modern anglers miss it.

Catch and release is so ingrained in our fly-fishing culture that most of my good fishing friends never keep fish — ever. All of a the sudden, I am the odd one, because I enjoy eating a mess of trout now and then.

It is important to me, and I am grateful that my boys love cooking up trout as much as I do. It is something we look forward to. Catching and cleaning our kill bonds and connects us to the experience of catching a fish in a way that might be missed if you've never sliced open the upper stomach contents of a trout to see what it's been eating.

Yes, we do that too. Last time, we found crayfish parts, mayfly nymphs and a large, living hellgrammite. Aiden (nine years old) was stunned. And he watched wide-eyed when the big, alien-legged insect swam away in the shallows.

"That was just in a trout's stomach!" he said.

It sure was.

These are the things that tie my sons not only to their past, but to the natural world itself. They connect us all. Sure, you can read about this in a book or learn it in a classroom. But until you have killed the animal, removed its organs, filleted it, and cooked flesh over a flame, you don't really understand the cycle completely. You will never feel it the same way.

Soon after that first trout that I cleaned for myself, my uncle gave me a Case knife. And I still use it to this day. It stays in my vest until needed. My history is strong with that knife. And I remember my past as I hold it. It links me to those days, those memories of the woods, of family and friendship. With each trout cleaned, I think of my uncle and his brother — my father. These strong men were my first fishing friends. And I am thankful.

We keep a couple dozen stocked trout every year but never the wild ones. And, in fact, I have not killed a wild trout for over a decade. But I think I may do it again soon. I know some places where brook trout are so numerous, in such remote areas, that taking five Brookies for the pan will not hurt a thing. And I want the boys to see the contrast of a wild Brookie. The flesh is salmon coloured. The meat is sweeter.

When keeping trout for a meal is the objective, the intensity of fishing is different. Set the hook, and the adrenaline kicks in because the stakes are higher — especially if the fishing is slow and your stomach is growling. The boys feel it. And their interest is more focused when we set out to keep a few trout for the day. It is just another thing that gets us out on the water together.

Last weekend, I took my sons to the same small stream that I camped beside when I was a boy. It is deep in the Pennsylvania wilderness, and it's still stocked. The fishing is poor compared to what we are spoiled with back home. But I thrive on tradition. I enjoy walking the same land I did with my uncle, with my father and my grandfather. Those moments and memories flood back to the surface, and they carry even more weight when my own sons are by my side.



We caught a nineteen-inch stocked brown trout within the first hour. And we killed it without hesitation. Because meat was our goal. It is the only trout we killed that morning. An hour or so later, we cleaned and filleted the fish, then grilled it streamside. Not too many things turn out the way you had them planned. But this was close.



**Fish hard, friends.**

## ***The Czech nymph step by step the Norwegian way***

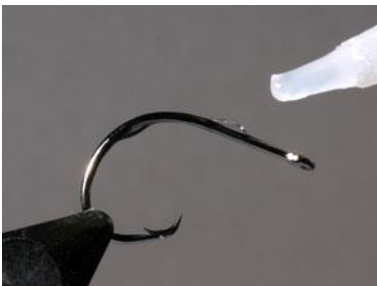
The Czech nymphing method requires flies that will sink rapidly, such as heavy and slim Czech nymphs. These nymphs imitate caddis larvae or Gammarus. For them to sink fast, some elements have been skipped that normally are part of the natural insect that it is supposed to imitate. But that does not really matter. The fish will not have time to study the details in fast-running water! It is much more important that the flies have the right shape and that they sink rapidly down to where the fish are.

### **Olive Czech Nymph**



|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Hook</b>                | <b>Mustad Ultrapoint 39951 # 2-10</b>   |
| <b>Thread</b>              | <b>Colour depending on the weight colour coding</b>                                   |
| <b>Weight</b>              | <b>0.2-0.8 mm square or rounded lead wire</b>   |
| <b>Body ribbing</b>        | <b>pearl tinsel</b>   |
| <b>Back shield ribbing</b> | <b>0.15 mm clear monofilament</b>   |
| <b>Body</b>                | <b>Light olive coloured dubbing, followed by two to three windings of red dubbing</b> |
| <b>Thorax</b>              | <b>Olive Dubbing</b>  |
| <b>Back shield</b>         | <b>Olive Magic Shrimp Foil</b>  |

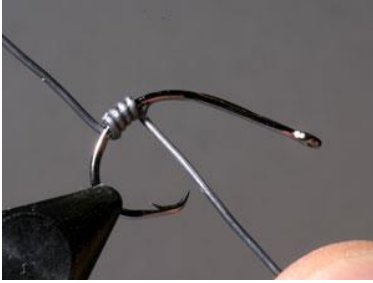
### **Instructions**



#### **Step 1:**

To avoid displacement of the lead body while you are tying in the other materials, it's a good idea to add a layer of super glue on the shank before you wind on the lead wire.





### **Step 2:**

Place the lead wire a bit down in the hook bend across the hook and make sure that the end slants downward. Take hold of the end with your left hand and use your right hand to wind the lead wire forward, making sure the windings are tightly wound. Remove excess wire.



### **Step 3:**

Attach the tying thread and tie in the Nymph Ribbing and 0.15 mm monofilament well into the hook bend.



### **Step 4:**

Dub some Light olive coloured muskrat dubbing onto the tying thread. Only use enough dubbing material to cover up the lead wire (this is why it's important that the windings are tight) so that light olive dubbing covers 2/3 of the body.



### **Step 5:**

Dub a small red-hot spot onto the thread and tie it in by two or three windings.



### **Step 6:**

Dub dark olive muskrat onto to the tying thread and wind it tightly forward towards the eye of the hook.



**Step 7:**

The next step is to create the ribs. This is done by making seven to eight windings of ribbing material.



**Step 8:**

Use a pair of scissors on the back shield and make a tiny apex extending forward. Tie it in just behind the hook eye. This will allow you to make a good-looking head. Pull the back shield over the body and tie it in by 7-8 windings of monofilament in such a manner as to get distinct body segments. Build a nice, conical head.



**Step 9:**

Use a dubbing brush or a dubbing needle to pull out fibres from the dubbing, particularly from the dark part of the thorax. Fibres extending on the side can be removed. This is important so that the fly won't be slowed down when sinking towards the bottom.



**Step 10:**

A Czech Nymph is ready for a deep dive.

**Some excellent Czech Nymph variants**



## ***Fish and Game 'imploding' as Government plans intervention by Charlie Mitchell***

The Government is planning an independent review of Fish & Game, following internal strife and a looming financial crisis that has the group in disarray.

It comes as the group famous for its aggressive environmental advocacy — including as founder of the “dirty dairying” campaign, which kicked off mainstream concern about agricultural pollution of rivers and lakes — is moderating its stance amid an internal shake-up.

The national Fish & Game council has ordered chief executive Martin Taylor, alongside other national staff, not to make proactive press releases containing negative statements about farmers. Last week, the national council’s long-time chairman, Lindsay Lyons, was removed without explanation through a majority vote by councillors.

It seemingly came as a surprise to Lyons, who has been chairman for six years, and on the council for 12. His replacement, Paul Shortis, says he expects the group will take a different approach to environmental advocacy. It is understood this will include an effort to work alongside organisations such as Federated Farmers.

Several former and current Fish and Game members spoken to by *Stuff* expressed concern about the organisation’s direction, and say the internal ructions show resistance to efforts to reform the group, which has remained virtually unchanged since it was established 30 years ago.

It also reflects increasing farming influence on the organisation's regional bodies.

Fish and Game's environmental advocacy has traditionally been aggressive, and frequently targeted the agriculture industry.

It has caused friction with some farmers, who need to buy licences from the organisation to hunt or fish, but do not support the tenor of its lobbying

Fish & Game has been one of New Zealand's most successful environmental organisations. It is responsible for 12 of 15 water conservation orders protecting the values of major rivers, and it frequently pushes for stronger regional rules around water pollution, including through the Environment Court.

Although it has a national body, Fish & Game is largely driven by its 12 regional counterparts, which act semi-autonomously. Each region reports separately to the Minister of Conservation and conducts its own field operations.

The national body is responsible for advocacy and setting national policy. It comprises members appointed by each of the regional bodies.

Several people familiar with the internal dynamics said that since 2018, there had been a concerted effort among the regions to resist increased control from the national council. In the past two years, at least five national councillors have either resigned or been replaced by their regional body.

“It's been the culmination of a long series of attacks on the pro-environment lobby,” one source said. “It's imploding at the moment.”

## **The Review**

The Government is understood to want an overhaul of the organisation, which is a statutory agency set up under the Conservation Act.

A recent national council meeting, held over Zoom, was joined by the Conservation Minister, Eugenie Sage, and Mervyn English, a senior manager at the Department of Conservation. Both said the idea of a review was in its early stages and could take several possible forms. It is understood both Sage and English favour a significant intervention, which would include an external review and an independent chair to run the council.

English — brother of former prime minister Sir Bill English — alluded to his concerns at the meeting on April 16.

“One of my observations about Fish and Game is that I often get different people tell me different things, and they all get suspicious about each other's agendas and what's really happening,” he told the councillors, according to a recording of the meeting seen by *Stuff*.

“There's no secret agendas here, there's no complications. We're concerned for the organisation, and we want to work with you in the most constructive way possible.”

Sage confirmed to *Stuff* on Thursday a review would take place but said the scope had yet to be finalised. It would be undertaken by an independent reviewer.

“No formal review of Fish & Game as an organisation has been done for some time,” she said. “It's useful for any organisation to have a regular health check on how it is performing against its statutory purpose and functions and what, if any changes are needed.”

When asked about Fish & Game seemingly moderating its environmental advocacy, Sage said the group had been an important check against freshwater pollution, particularly in its work pushing for water conservation orders on major rivers.

“Fish & Game has stepped up where regional councils have failed to act,” she said. “Advocacy is part of Fish & Game's statutory functions. I have enormous respect for its work advocating for healthy waterways and the interests of anglers and hope that continues.”

## **Simmering tensions**

Several sources say internal conflict has been building over time but started in earnest around two years ago. Since Fish & Game was formed in 1990, there had been no review or audit of the national body or any of its regional counterparts.

That changed with three audits in quick succession, each in response to complaints about specific regional bodies. All three found management or financial problems, to varying degrees.

An audit of the North Canterbury branch found issues around the handling of money bequeathed by a Christchurch man, as well as “serious issues with management and office practices”. An audit into the Central South Island region followed a complaint about alleged conflicts of interest with former chairman Gary Rooney; the audit found those conflicts of

interest had been appropriately managed, but it “did not manage the perception as well as it could have.”

A recent audit into Hawke's Bay Fish and Game — which multiple sources say is known to be dysfunctional — found a host of problems, including complaints of a “toxic culture”. The national council requested branch chairman Bruce Bates resign following the audit's release, but he did not, and remains the chairman.

As this was happening, there was growing concern within the organisation about the tone of its environmental advocacy. Under the law, the organisation is required to advocate for the interests of anglers and hunters, including the management and protection of habitats.

Its aggressive approach to freshwater issues — championed by former chief executive Bryce Johnson, who ran the organisation from its inception until 2017 — had made the group enemies, particularly in the agriculture industry.

At the most recent Fish and Game elections, held in 2018, a campaign by Federated Farmers to elect farmers onto the regional Fish and Game councils was moderately successful. Around a dozen of the newly elected representatives were farmers, joining numerous other farmers already on the councils.

At the time, Fish & Game chief executive Martin Taylor said it appeared to be an effort to blunt the organisation's environmental advocacy.



#### **Chinook Salmon released into the Waimakariri river by Fish and Game**

Following the elections 2018, there was high turnover on the national council. The council is now almost entirely different from three years ago.

The most significant sign of a change in direction came when the council, in November last year, passed a resolution in a public excluded session forbidding the chief executive from making statements seen to be negative towards farmers.

It was ostensibly because the council wanted a survey of councillors and licence holders about their views on the group's advocacy work. The results of the survey have not been released, and the order remains in place.



It has already changed the tenor of the organisation's advocacy. In a March press release, revealing the results of the organisation's latest Colmar Brunton environment survey, comments attributed to Taylor make no mention of farming.

In a similar release two years earlier, responding to that year's survey results, Taylor makes repeated mention of farming, including "dirty dairying", the phrase the organisation popularised.

The national council has also enquired about starting a national environmental awards programme to highlight good farming practice.



**An angler in the Waimakariri River, north of Christchurch**

Current and former members of the organisation spoken to by *Stuff* said the growing farmer influence happened parallel to the regional resistance to overhauling Fish & Game, but both had the effect of undermining the national body.

Reform efforts had been pushed by Martin Taylor, who was appointed chief executive in 2017, with a mandate to make changes. "Martin has ruffled a few feathers," one source said. "He has a clear idea of what is good governance and what is not."

Another source said Taylor's interest in reform — including his support of an external review — had led to "kickback" from the regions.

On Thursday, Taylor said the organisation was comfortable with a Government review: "We know it hasn't been reviewed in its lifetime and that's very odd in government — our legislation is quite old," he said.

"This is an appropriate time to do a review, and we look forward to working with the Minister of Conservation in terms of the process and what we need to do to bring this to a start and a finish.

When asked about the constraints on his media statements, Taylor said he was "happy to follow the direction" of the board. "As a chief executive, you have to follow the direction of your board, and boards have differing views at different times", he said.

The Government itself is long understood to have wanted changes in the organisation, even prior to the current coalition Government. It is understood there have been multiple complaints made to Sage about issues within regional offices, some of which prompted at least one of the recent audits.

The combination of various tensions culminated in the removal of Lindsay Lyons as the national council chairman last week.

Lyons — who declined to comment when approached by *Stuff*— was asked by councillors to step aside as chairman. He did not, prompting a tense standoff among the councillors, that culminated in his removal.

He was replaced by Paul Shortis, a member of the Wellington Fish & Game council. Shortis told *Stuff* the change reflected a desire for new leadership.

“It was probably time for a change, in the majority of the councillors' minds. Lindsay didn't agree with that which was unfortunate,” he said. “Like any organisation, you occasionally go through periods of tension and a little bit of dysfunction, and we've just been through that.”

The national council was not necessarily opposed to a Government review, he said.

“There are normal reservations any organisation would have to an external review. We're quite happy to progress discussions around a review and in what form that might take and what timetable it might have.

“It's probably time to have an external look at the way we do stuff. We're probably capable of doing it ourselves internally, but we'd probably get someone external to assist us anyway.” He declined to comment in detail about changes to the tenor Fish & Game's advocacy but confirmed it would change: “I don't see it being the same.”

The organisation is also facing considerable financial pressure as a consequence of Covid-19.

Much of its income comes from overseas hunters and anglers. Locals have been unable to hunt or fish under level four restrictions, and a shortened game bird season is likely under level three restrictions. A financial status report released this week assumed that Fish & Game would lose all its non-resident licence income, and 10 per cent of its local licence income. It could lead to a loss of \$2m this year and \$1.5m the following year.

The same document made broader observations about the organisation and its finances.

It noted that 78 per cent of regional expenditure was in the form of salaries and human resources costs. It said: “There is a significant lack of financial transparency across the organisation” and “there is little or no external review of decisions.

*Editor's note: As a member of the Wellington Fish and Game Council there some details and facts that are not covered in this article, as an example our Field Office have been refused access to farm land that we have used in the past as part of the 'duck counting survey's' – the Wellington Council is one of a number of Councils who have raised the issue of the constant negative message being sent from National Office to the media on 'dirty dairying and farming.'*

*Like most media channels you are only hearing one side of the story, Malcolm*

**Please refer to page 37 and the article ‘Sabotage at Fish and Game by Dave Witherow’ that I received just before the sending out this newsletter.**

## *If you head out, practice Responsible Recreation by Chris Wood*



### **Angler Earl Harper doing what so many of us do when we head to the water—finding space and solitude**

As the ongoing pandemic evolves and stay-at-home orders and shelter-in-place orders are beginning to lift around the country, anglers everywhere are itching to get outside and go fishing.

It is completely understandable, given what, for many, has become the “lost spring.” Typically, at this time of year, I would be on the Potomac by 5:30 a.m. tossing shad darts at hickory and American shad before heading into the office. And I wholeheartedly encourage TU members and supporters who live in places where fishing is safe and legal to engage in the pastime that binds us all together.

That said, we should also take the necessary precautions to stay safe in the face of COVID-19. We’re seeing some encouraging news on the medical front, but we’re also hearing from medical experts that this vicious virus might be with us for a while, and that we’d be foolish to abandon some of the basic practices that have allowed some states to start “reopening.”

Fishing, even as the virus is still circulating around the world, can be safe, assuming those who partake do so wisely. To that end, Trout Unlimited (TU) and several of our conservation partners around the country, are launching a #ResponsibleRecreation campaign. It is a simple, yet profoundly important, effort to encourage anglers and hunters of all stripes to get afield, but to do so while being safe and smart.

There might be a temptation for many to abandon some of the basic precautions we have all become familiar with over the last few months. Social distancing, for instance, may seem burdensome when you are on a river or in a boat. The temptation to abandon the masks and face shields many of us have been wearing when we are in close proximity to others might be difficult to resist while we are chasing trout with a fishing buddy or two.

At TU, we are asking our members and supporters to go fishing, but to stay a rod-length apart from their fishing buddies. We are asking anglers who must fish from drift boats (guides and clients on big rivers and lakes, for instance), to wear cloth masks or face shields to prevent the spread of the virus to others as best they can. We know guides are anxious to get back to work, but who are equally concerned about having strangers on their boat for hours at a time. Ideally, fishing from boats could wait, but where it is legal, we encourage both guides and clients to be as safe as possible.

Other important practices include traveling to the river alone when at all possible, in separate vehicles, so we are not risking the spread of the virus in a confined vehicle. Better yet, fish alone. I, honestly, prefer to fish alone, anyway. It is also a good idea to “fish local,” and stay close to home when we decide to go fishing. That way, we are not risking introducing the virus to smaller “destination” communities where they may not have the medical infrastructure to deal with a significant outbreak.

Some of us might be tempted to drive a little farther, not realizing that we are being a bit riskier, simply because we do not feel sick. Remember, as many as one in five of everyone infected by the virus is asymptomatic — we might feel fine but could easily share the disease with someone for whom the consequences could be deadly.

Being safe and being considerate is important, not just to keep ourselves safe, but to keep our fellow anglers and, frankly, everyone we come into contact with, safe over the long haul. The medical community continues to warn us all that this virus is not going to just go away on its own, and that we are very likely many months away from an effective vaccine. To lessen the spread of the virus, it is important that we continue to keep our guards up and do our best to stay safe.

This, too, shall pass. But until it is safe to “go back to normal,” the new normal must prevail. To be able to continue fishing (and hunting, camping, hiking, etc.), we need to practice #ResponsibleRecreation.

Please join TU and our partners in this effort and continue taking the needed steps to keep you and your loved ones safe, even as you step outside to the river and go fishing.



**Upper Waikanae River**



## *The Lure of Trout by Derek Grzelewski – from issue 46 NZ Geographic magazine*



Ever since the American writer Zane Grey fished these waters in the 1920s and declared New Zealand to be the “angler’s Eldorado,” fly-fishing enthusiasts have beaten a path to our river-banks and lake shores to test their skills against the trout’s cunning. In central North Island rivers such as the renowned Tongariro River rainbow trout predominate hard-fighting, fine-tasting fish whose speckled flanks and blush of pink make them an alluring as well as a challenging quarry.

Twilight was drawing on, and beneath the willows that shaded the river the mayflies were swarming. They milled about in clouds, rising, and falling in a hypnotic love dance like twisters of confetti. Only yesterday, they had emerged into the terrestrial world after a year under water. They broke the surface, their wings blossoming like flowers in time-lapse photography, and flew off, their only purpose to attend this swooping aerial orgy that was the climax of their lives, to seed the new generation, to complete the cycle. Now, exhausted and spent, they were falling into the river in their hundreds. And the water below them was boiling.

Trout had sensed the banquet. Instinct told them that on windless spring evenings the willows would rain the ephemeral manna of mayflies. Now they were feeding with a frenzy, engrossed in a happy hour of greed, their mouths flashing open and white, snapping, and gulping without pause.

Kneeling down on the bank, I strained a handful of water through my fingers, picked up a bedraggled mayfly and let it down into my open fly box. Still looking for a mate or just a place to die, it crawled among the dozens of artificial flies pinned to a foam cushion in tidy rows. Tired or hopeful, it settled by one named Twilight Beauty.

### **A fish tale**

They could have been twins, I thought, tying the artificial fly to the end of my nylon leader, and casting it into the boil with a whip of the rod. The fly disappeared in the throng of wriggling, wing-flapping insects like a well-dressed English gentleman at a rock concert. I twitched it, jiggled it, recast it, and waited for a fish to take it. I changed it for other equally persuasive flies—Kakahi Queen, Royal Wulff, Dad’s Favourite—but as time and the river flowed, the daylight



waned, and with it my hopes. No more than a rod-length away, trout were gorging themselves silly. I could hear the almost continuous splashing of their feast. Only I, it appeared, would not be feasting tonight.

“All good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy,” wrote Norman Maclean in his saga of family and fishing, *A River Runs through It*. Anyone who has stood in a bone-chilling river at dawn, trying to outsmart a fish with a few bits of silk and feather tied to a hook, will attest to the difficulty. Indeed, such are the skills and knowledge required that the road to trout-fishing grace—or, more to the point, trout-catching grace—can be as long as a lifetime.

Ah, but there is no life so happy as that of the well-governed angler, observed Izaak Walton, the father of trout writing, in the 17th century. And few so educative. The pursuit of trout opens new doors to understanding the natural world. Trout dwell in an intricate web of rivers and lakes, streams and brooks—the very bloodstream of the Earth—and the angler fingering his flyline adrift in the current is, on one level, doing nothing less than taking its aquatic pulse.

On the Mataura River, where the gluttonous trout were spurning my immaculate flies, that heartbeat felt reassuringly strong. The Mataura rises in the Eyre Mountains of South Otago and flows for 160 unhurried kilometres across the Southland plains, through the town of Gore and out to sea. To those who fish its waters, it is a river of legend, offering a fly-fishing experience that is close to perfection. But thumb through any New Zealand trout-fishing guidebook and you will find dozens more rivers that fit that description—lauded for their solitude, breath-taking surroundings, crystal-clear water, and trophy-sized fish. Surely, we live in the Country of Trout.

Little wonder, then, that the people of Gore built a monument to the fish and proclaimed their town the brown trout capital of the world. Or that Taupo, Rotorua, and Nelson have become angling Meccas, each with its pilgrims and devotees.



Yet 150 years ago New Zealand—along with the rest of the southern hemisphere—was a trout-free zone. Trout, members of the salmon family, are natives of the north. It has been only through the efforts of humans that they are today found in such places as Patagonia, South Africa, southern Australia, and New Zealand. The fact that these demanding and fastidious

creatures have done so well in New Zealand waters says something about the quality of our waterways—something that can no longer be taken for granted.

According to the latest classification scheme, there is no distinction between a “trout” and a “salmon.” The 13 trout species recognised today are classified largely on a geographical basis. For example, Atlantic salmonids (brown trout and Atlantic salmon) are grouped together in the genus *Salmo*, while rainbows (originating on the west coast of North America) are placed with cutthroat trout and Pacific salmon in *Oncorhynchus*.

Although trout are usually thought of as freshwater fish, some are equally at home in the sea. These species are anadromous, meaning they live in the sea but travel up freshwater rivers and streams to spawn. Unlike salmon, trout, particularly browns, are flexible in their anadromy. Some individuals move from one river system to another via the sea. Many become permanent river residents, forgoing their migrations altogether, while others settle in lakes, treating them as seas of a sort and using the inflowing rivers as their spawning grounds. And while moving and well-oxygenated water is a cardinal requirement for breeding, some trout even spawn along lake edges where there is enough wind-induced wave action to supply the ova with oxygen.

Why many trout favour an exclusively freshwater existence is something of a mystery. Food is more plentiful in the sea, which is why sea-run brown trout (actually silver in colour) can grow so large that they are sometimes mistaken for salmon. Their growth is also helped by warmer temperatures in the sea, for lakes and rivers cool and freeze much more readily than the sea does. Against these advantages, freshwater habitats contain fewer predators, and it may be that river-and lake-run trout are playing a safety game, sacrificing size for greater odds of survival to breeding age.

Fish biologists remain unsure whether the migratory impulse is an attribute of particular strains or races within a species, or whether it is purely up to the individual. Sometimes fish representing all three life-history options—river, lake, and sea—coexist in the same waterway.

The idiosyncratic lives of trout, their slender form and pied beauty, their large mouths and predatory disposition, their unpredictability as a sporting quarry—all these aspects contribute to the aura of mystique that surrounds them. No other fish have become the subject of so much art, literature, and esoteric rumination.

There is an air of exclusiveness about fly-fishing, a residue of the times when English landlords fished their private rivers that flowed “clear as gin and twice as expensive.” Fly-fishing is associated with a certain aristocracy of mind and spirit which comes from deliberately taking the harder road, pitting one’s skill against the trout’s wily capriciousness. It is a well-blended cocktail of arcane tradition, the nobility of the quarry (casting to a flounder would not be the same!) and the meditative quality of moving water that evokes freshness and renewal.

Traditionally, fly-fishing has been the pursuit of men of means, and it was such men who initiated the introduction of trout to New Zealand in the 1860s. Specifically, it was the well-to-do gentlemen in tweeds who chaired this country’s acclimatisation societies who advocated seeding the country’s rivers with salmonids. Somehow, as the young colony evolved, an egalitarian trout dream was born: the aristocrat of fish gracing the tables of everyman.

On foot and horseback, good keen men fanned out into the country, releasing hatchery-raised trout fry into every river, tarn or pond they could find. Later, their efforts were supplemented from the air. While pilots skimmed low across high-country lakes, assistants frantically dished out bucketsful of fish through an open hatch, mostly into the water, but on mistimed occasions into the tussock as well.

Later still, and sometimes illegally, came helicopters with monsoon buckets—ideal containers for dropping fish quickly and accurately into some of the country’s most remote locales. The fish did the rest, colonising vigorously until there was hardly a waterway that did not have trout in it.

Trout fever spread like a goldrush, the dream coming true faster than anyone could have imagined. Hamish Furneaux, a retired pharmacist in Wanaka and a lifetime angler, recalls his childhood in the Manawatu: “It was a truly remarkable time. Farmers would keep their rods in the cowshed, and in the evening, after milking, walk across the paddocks to the river, and easily catch enough trout to feed the whole family. In the Old Country this was simply unthinkable.

Unthinkable, too, was the size of the fish. Early reports reaching England were greeted with head-wagging incredulity. What could the angling Establishment make of news of a pair of 15 kg brown trout taken from Lake Heron in 1884? Such monsters were unknown in merry England. How would one go about catching one? With a rifle? A harpoon?

But the stories kept on coming. In 1927, using a spinner, a Dunedin dentist named Boot caught a brown trout in Lake Wakatipu that weighed close to 17 kg. A similar-sized rainbow was winched out of the Mangamutu Stream, near Taupo, and in the lake itself, one night in 1925, an angler caught 11 fish, 10 of which were over 9 kg.

At around the same time, Rotorua anglers routinely released any fish under 5 kg. Even today—although many an angler laments that the fishing is not what it used to be—lunker trout are undoubtedly out there. Only a decade ago, Kaikoura pilot Noel Boyd got himself one such trophy. He was working on deer recovery in the mountains near Molesworth Station, when, from the air, he saw a mammoth trout floating on the surface on Lake McRae. He landed nearby and recovered the fish, which had been dead for some time. It weighed 15 kg, and is now on display in a Nelson hangar, procured, you might say, with an imitation of a dragonfly: a helicopter.

**If anywhere can** claim to be trophy territory, it is Taupo. The lake that gives its name to the region and town is the largest lake in Australasia. It is the size of Singapore and contains 60 cubic kilometres of water—enough to cover the land area of the North Island to a depth of half a metre. The lake is the caldera of an ancient volcano which last erupted in 186 A.D. This blow-out is considered to be the most violent in Earth’s recent history, but it was only a fraction of the magnitude of many previous Taupo eruptions. One in 20,000 B.C. covered the Chatham Islands, more than 800 km away, with a layer of ash 12 cm thick. Another produced enough pumice to fill the present lake twice.

Over the millennia, as the volcano has intermittently blown, gargled, hawked, and spat, its caldera has slowly filled up with water, in time becoming one of the most famous fishbowls in the world.

Although both brown and rainbow trout are to be found in Lake Taupo, it is the feisty rainbows that have given the lake its international reputation. Their progenitors were first released into a

tributary of the Tongariro River in 1898. Within four years, rainbow trout weighing 3.5-4 kg were being caught in the Waikato River, which flows out of Lake Taupo, and in the lake itself a 10 kg fish was caught five years after the first releases. In one season, 56,000 fish, totalling 112 tonnes, were taken from the lake and its associated rivers. Trout were so plentiful that they were given to local farmers as pig food.

Then, in 1912, the size and the quality of the fish rapidly deteriorated. It was a textbook case of an introduced predator—trout—upsetting the balance of an existing ecosystem, in this case decimating the resident population of koaro, a native galaxiid fish. To remedy the situation, gamekeepers embarked on a massive netting exercise to reduce trout numbers. The solution worked for a while, but by the early 1930s there were again too many trout and not enough food. This time the wardens employed a different strategy: rather than culling the predator they bolstered the prey. Common smelt, a small silvery fish, were introduced. They spread like locusts and have thrived in Lake Taupo ever since. The trout population bounced back with vigour.

Those early years of the Taupo fishery were a time of great secrecy among anglers. One Taupo saga tells of an Irishman named de Lautour, who was the first to fish the Waitahanui River—today one of the country's premier trout venues. The reclusive de Lautour lived in a reed hut on a Maori burial ground, for which he paid rent of two bags of flour a year. He tied his flies on the riverbank, never keeping spares in case someone should find them. For seven years he lived there on trout and the vegetables he grew, until the idyll came to an abrupt end when he poisoned a litter of his landlord's pigs, which kept rooting in his garden, and was banished from the area. But by then the secret was already out, and someone else was about to trumpet it to the world.

That person was Zane Grey, writer of Westerns and catcher of fish. In 1926, the New Zealand government invited him to fish here in the hope that he would promote the country as a fishing destination.

As a tourism promotion, it was wildly successful. Grey and his entourage fished for marlin in the Bay of Islands and for trout in Taupo. And although, as his biographer, Robert Davis, points out, "If Zane went out with a mosquito net to catch minnows, he could make it sound like a Roman gladiator setting forth to slay whales in the Tiber," Grey's antipodean adventures needed no literary embellishment. The resultant books, *Tales of the Angler's Eldorado: New Zealand* and *Tales from a Fisherman's Log*, became instant classics. The title of the former created an image that stuck, and Grey's prose gave New Zealand an angling reputation that has not faded since.

But Grey's enthusiasm went further than it was welcomed. He was so thrilled by the quality of fishing in Taupo that he wanted to buy the entire Tongariro River.

Fortunately for other anglers, Grey's dream of owning one of the best trout rivers in the world did not eventuate. In 1926, the year *Tales of the Angler's Eldorado* was published, the government passed laws to ensure Lake Taupo and its tributary rivers remained in public ownership.

Grey returned to the Rogue River in Oregon, where he wrote his cowboy romances and fished for steelheads (sea-run rainbow trout). On his front porch, he installed a game fishing chair

rigged up with a system of pulleys and weights like a gym machine, but with a rod instead of a bench press. In this chair he worked out, preparing for his expeditions, and it was here, just before the outbreak of World War II, that he died of heart failure at the age of 68, pumping iron the angler's way.

The river of Grey's dreams rises from the snows of Ruapehu as the upper Waikato and is named Tongariro only after it joins with Waihohonu Stream, 35 km from its four-armed delta on the shores of Lake Taupo. No other stretch of water in the country, with the possible exception of the neighbouring Waitahanui and Tauranga-Taupo Rivers, is so steeped in angling history and tradition. Every pool has a name and a story ... and at least half a dozen anglers.

For many of them, fishing the Tongariro is a pinnacle in a lifetime of angling. When standing shoulder to shoulder with such devoted fishers, it pays to have a reasonable command of casting—if for no other reason than to reduce the chance of hooking your neighbour's ear with a wayward fly.

The perfect cast is accurate and effortless and delivers the lure to the quarry without arousing its suspicion. It looks simply but is, in fact, bafflingly complex. The soaring arc of the line can be likened to an angler's aerial signature—an illegible scribble in the case of the beginner, calligraphy in motion when performed by the expert.

When I first visited Taupo, I had barely learnt the letters of the angling alphabet. As luck would have it, I found myself in a master caster class with Carol Harwood, a sprightly woman in her 60s who, when I met her, was nursing a sprained elbow from tussling with a 10 kg salmon in Alaska.

She learned to fish the hard way, she told me, by watching and emulating her 69-year-old husband, Frank, a Yorkshire-born Taupo fly-fishing guide. He had been a merciless teacher, Carol recalled, citing the example of a fly-tying session. To make a fly you place the business end of a hook in a miniature vice and wrap bits of feathers, fur, or chenille around the shank, tying them down with multiple wraps of fine thread. If her fly were anything but perfect, Frank would shave it off the shank with a razor blade and make her start again.

Thanks to her aptitude with needlework, Carol gave him few opportunities to wield the blade, but still, for the first year of her tough apprenticeship she just stood behind her husband in the river, looking over his shoulder and listening. That was 16 years ago. Now this “five-foot-nothing old girl,” as she describes herself, has been admitted into the ranks of the New Zealand Professional Fishing Guides Association, one of only two female guides in what remains a male-dominated sport.

On her Turangi lawn, Carol took me through one of Frank's diabolical exercises. The daisies were out in force, and she pointed out a clump of three about 10 m away. With a quick backcast she had the line in the air. She paused momentarily to let it straighten behind her back, then her forearm came down like a hammer, her thumb on the rod's cork handle, sighting one of the flowers. The line shot forward like a whip, its tip patted the daisy's head and left it quivering. One! A backcast, another daisy. Two! Another backcast and a miss, though not by much.

“Oops! I'll do it again,” she said, her face focused as if she were threading a needle. One! Two! Three! The daisies quivered.

“Your turn,” she said. “Pick your flowers.”



I made a couple of false casts to judge the distance, then let the line fly and—lo and behold—the line-tip hit a daisy on the head!

“Excellent!” Carol applauded, “See, it’s not that hard!”

I smiled uneasily. Should I tell her? The daisy I had aimed for was another metre to the side.

**Most towns have** their fairs, fetes, and galas—the occasions that put them fleetingly into the limelight—but Taupo and its environs seem able to sustain a year-long celebration of trout. Even when the upper reaches of the spawning rivers are closed to fishing in winter, the lake and river mouths remain accessible and productive.

In a Turangi hostel shortly after New Year—the height of the summer angling season—I met Paul Adren, a 27-year-old Englishman whose lobster-tan face bore the unmistakable bug-eye imprint of his polarising angling sunglasses. Back home, he works as a casting tutor and representative for a fishing gear manufacturer, but every English off-season he comes to New Zealand for his share of the angler’s Arcadia. Where else but here, he asked me, can you fish for world-class trout every day of the year for a mere \$55?

“All trout and salmon rivers in the UK are privately owned, so fishing is exclusive and expensive,” he told me as we motored in his aluminium dinghy towards the Tongariro delta. “You pay the owner and get an allocated stretch of the river, say 200 yards of the left bank, from one fence to another. For a well-known chalk stream like the Test or the Itchen [from which some of New Zealand’s brown trout originate] it can cost you a hundred quid a day, and you have to book months ahead. And these are the rivers where you *can* go. There are many more where you can’t, not unless you have a ‘Sir’ to your name.”

We beached the boat on a gravel bar and waded up one of the delta channels, thigh-deep in the water, volcanic sand squirting between our toes with every step. In a river, the trout nose into the current, so by walking upstream you can often sneak to within a good casting distance.

That day we surprised many fish. One which remains fixed in my memory lay in mid-stream, a big brown trout finning just enough to maintain its position. I cast repeatedly, but the fish refused all my offerings, sometimes ignoring them completely, sometimes coming in for a closer look, then turning back without a take. My hands shook every time I changed a fly.

“Here, try this,” Paul whispered over my shoulder. From his backpack, he produced a wooden box the size of a laptop computer, which, like a portable entomological museum, contained sheets and sheets of insects, all of them artificial. Earlier that day Paul had told me that, as a boy, he had owned a set of aquaria in which he kept not fish but bugs. He watched them grow and metamorphose, from eggs to larvae to nymphs to adults. He studied their behaviour and habits, then tied precisely matching imitations. Now he carried the fruit of this and other research in his wooden box: 8000 different flies in all colours and sizes—at shop prices worth about \$20,000—covering most foreseeable fishing scenarios.

He handed me a large dry fly, which I tied on and cast. It floated on the surface like a bird’s feather and the trout snatched it the way a dog snatches a stick. My line went as taut as a guitar string and the water exploded around the fish. A few minutes later, I scooped the trout out with my landing net. Its body was flecked like greenstone, and just as cold. On the pilgrimage to Tongariro I had found my shrine.

We caught and missed other fish that day before dusk fell, and then a warm summer night. Stumbling in the darkness, we waded downstream, sweeping the way ahead for obstacles with our rods until the dagger of a young moon came out to guide us. At first, the outboard would not start, and when it did the boat's lights short-circuited. We pattered at a snail's pace, groping our way through the narrow channel from one marker to another, alone on the lake, laughing a lot. We seemed to step outside of time and into our boyhood again, playing Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer adrift in a clapped-out boat. I thought there was no other place I would rather be.

I returned to Taupo the following July because from late autumn to early spring, when the water is at its coolest, rainbow trout return to their spawning streams. What guides them? No one knows for sure. Perhaps it is the bouquet of tastes and odours peculiar to each stream. Perhaps the Earth's magnetic field plays a part. But, almost unfailingly, they come back to their own birthplace to breed.

Unlike salmon, which die after spawning, trout can make their river run several times. But the journey of up to 20 km—an obstacle course of rapids and shallows, culminating in mating battles and the excavation of the spawning beds, the redds is hard on a fish. On their way back to lake or sea, they often look emaciated.

At Taupo, when autumn has been dry and the river levels low, trout congregate in vast numbers at the stream mouths, waiting for rain. A downpour literally opens the floodgates, and the fish surge upriver. These piscatorial rush hours, when fish from the whole lake must pass through the narrows of the river mouths, are eagerly awaited by anglers, who, on days when the fish are running, form "picket fences," rod-wielding human palisades which the fish must pass.

But pass they do—in astonishing numbers. On the upper reaches of the Whitiākau Stream, across from the Rangipo Prison grounds, I witnessed the end of the journey: several hundred rainbow trout in water so shallow their backs were half above the surface while their bellies rubbed against the coarse gravel bottom.

With Turangi Department of Conservation fisheries scientist Michel Dedual, I crept along the stony bank to the water's edge. The trout, preoccupied with the business of sex, were so close we could almost touch them.

Dedual, an affable Swiss ichthyologist who has been in Turangi long enough to acquire a Billy T James giggle, knows trout intimately. He has caught and eaten them, radio-tracked and dived with them and watched them for hours, yet even he could not contain his excitement at the sight of such abundance.



“Amazing, huh?” he exclaimed. “As a fisheries scientist I follow closely what happens with fish populations around the world—in Alaska, Patagonia, Europe. They all pale next to this. I know of no better place than Lake Taupo for wild rainbow trout. New Zealanders—even the locals—just do not realise how good we have it.

Taupo’s brown trout spawn earlier, Dedual told me, moving up the rivers in April and May, and the resident rainbows often gather just below the redds, feeding on eggs which get washed downstream. But the rivers that drain the Volcanic Plateau contain large amounts of pumice and small stones, some of which are similar in shape and size to trout ova. Dedual has caught rainbows with their bellies full of ova-size pumice. “They feel as crunchy as bean bags,” he said.

Why is Taupo such an outstanding fishery, I asked? “It’s a combination of things,” Dedual explained. “The water is exceptionally clean because there is relatively little farming around the lake edges. There are buffer zones of forest along the length of the inflowing rivers and streams, and their bottoms are made of porous, volcanic gravel, which purifies the water like a carbon filter.

Then there is a profusion of smelt in the lake, which the trout can hunt with little effort. Also, the fish can spawn all year round. Although they prefer the colder months, you can see spawning runs happening in summer as well. But most importantly, the entire system is large, diverse, and robust. If a cataclysm should strike at one end—a flood, localised pollution, or even a volcanic eruption—there will be rivers and streams at the other end which are not affected. The trout population is healthy and self-sustaining. Even if severely depleted, it will bounce back quickly. And of course, we monitor it closely.”

They do so because in Taupo, where 60,000-70,000 fishing licences are sold annually, angling is big business, bringing close to \$100 million a year to the local economy. Using echo-sounding surveys, DoC’s fisheries managers can estimate the number of fish of legal angling size in the lake. (It fluctuates between 80,000 and 220,000.) In summer, they make aerial sweeps, counting boats and assessing the fishing pressure. They interview and educate anglers, run a hatchery for public-relations purposes (being a self-sustaining fishery, Taupo does not need to be topped up with hatchery-raised trout, as Lake Rotorua and some other lakes do), set minimum legal sizes and bag limits and curb poaching. Their work seems to be paying off handsomely: the trout fishing at Taupo is as good as it has ever been.

To gain a trout’s-eye view of the situation, I teamed up with local scuba instructor Damian McMillan for a drift-dive down the Waikato, the only river draining Lake Taupo.

“If you hear a thundering noise, we’ve gone too far!” McMillan told me, nodding to where, three kilometres downstream, the Huka Falls barricade the river, forming a natural dam that keeps downstream fish out of the greater Taupo system. Then he lowered himself into the 12°C water and swam off in that direction.

The visibility was six or seven metres, and small rainbow trout seemed to hang in the current like seabirds riding the wind. Tiny twisters of gravel and sand travelled along the pale-yellow riverbed, which otherwise looked as barren as a moonscape. The world of the trout can be surprisingly austere and bleak, flushed by regular floods and almost devoid of colour, furnished only with rocks and occasional sunken trees.

To a terrestrial observer, trout may appear indolent, lying inside eddies, waiting for food to float past, but the truth is that, in a fast river, they do not have much choice. Every metre of up- or cross-stream travel requires a major investment of energy. While a lake trout can cruise its beat at leisure, snacking on a morsel here and there, the river trout must master the vagaries of the current.

When the river pours over and around obstacles, it swirls and buckles and folds back on itself, creating pockets of almost stationary water. These sheltered niches are a trout's prime real estate, and there you find them, almost motionless, fins twitching with minor adjustments, only centimetres away from a swifter flow which, like a conveyor belt, delivers a continuous smorgasbord of insects, the trout's "fast food."

The current also brings oxygen, but before the water enters the trout's gills it passes through a series of comb-like gill rakes which sieve out the debris. These crude strainers cannot remove fine silt, however, which can clog the gills and kill the fish. This is why you find trout only in relatively clean water. For them, a silty stream is like living in a continuous sandstorm.

Water clarity has a bearing on the size of fish, too. River trout hunt primarily by sight. In order to catch prey, they need to see it coming well in advance, so that they have time to intercept it. The clearer the water, the better the hunting and the bigger the fish. The fact that New Zealand boasts such large river trout can be attributed partly to water purity. But in many parts of the country, that purity is under threat.



"Rivers will be tomorrow's beech forests—the next environmental battleground," predicts Bryce Johnson, national director of Fish & Game New Zealand, the statutory body that manages freshwater fishing and game-bird hunting. His organisation, which evolved out of the country's two dozen acclimatisation societies in the late 1980s, represents the interests of the country's anglers and shooters and is financed from the annual sale of fishing and hunting licences (in 1999, 123,000 and 34,500 respectively). Though characterised by some as a blood-sports lobby, it functions as a vocal and effective conservation group.

“You won’t find more vigilant environmental watchdogs than anglers, particularly fly-fishermen,” Neil Deans, Fish & Game’s regional manager for Nelson and Marlborough, tells me. “They spend a lot of time on the water. They study the river flows and the insect life, and they are the first to know if there is a problem. And because they are so passionate about trout, they also take the initiative and act. Of the 25 water conservation orders [the equivalent of national-park legislation for rivers and lakes] covering the country’s signature waterways, such as the Maitai, Pomahaka, Rakaia, Buller, Rangitikei, Mohaka and Motu Rivers, 19 were initiated and seen through by anglers.”

Deans’ demeanour is far from that of a dreamy-eyed angler watching the mayfly hatch. He is a veteran of many courtroom battles on behalf of Fish & Game. Fluent in legalese, he speaks with enough let-me-finish determination to make the voice of the angler heard even during the most heated debates. “Hydro-electricity proposals, particularly on small trout rivers, used to be our main headache,” he says, “but now we have to deal with a host of other issues as well. Clean water is in such demand that our rivers are virtually under siege. In some cases, the allocated water permits exceed the river flow. So, although our job is to look after fisheries, in reality we find ourselves lobbying for sustainable water management, because this is the bottom line for trout—for the whole country, in fact.”

Scientists, too, speak of a crisis in the health of our streams—of waters which once ran clear and sweet, now murky, and lacklustre, flowing at a fraction of their previous strength. “Our clean, green image is wearing thinner every day,” says freshwater ecologist John Hayes. “What sustains the illusion is the fact that we have so much relatively unaltered and mountainous backcountry. But we are losing lowland trout rivers and creeks right across the populated countryside. They are being clogged up by erosion, siphoned off for irrigation, even used as drains.”

Hayes is running several trout research projects under the aegis of Nelson’s Cawthron Institute. He says trout make excellent indicators of the health of our waterways because they are the most studied freshwater fish in the world, they are sensitive to contamination and they are found throughout the country. Like canaries in a coalmine, what they indicate can be alarming.

Hayes gives the example of Otago’s Pomahaka River. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Pomahaka yielded a third of all trout caught in Otago. It was considered on a par with the Maitai. Says Hayes: “The local farmers will tell you how they tickled the trout there, and how good the fishing was, but now some of them won’t let their kids swim in the river.” Despite being protected by a water conservation order, the middle and lower reaches of the Pomahaka run dirty and turbid for most of the time. Angler use of the river has declined by more than 80 per cent in the past 20 years.

Bob McDowall, an eminent fisheries scientist at the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research, offers another example: the Selwyn River, just south of Christchurch. Locals used to boast that it was the best brown-trout river in the world. Their catch bags seemed limitless. Trophy trout reaching 11 kg and 90 cm were caught, and millions of ova were taken from the river and sold to acclimatisation societies elsewhere in the country. In 1949, a trap installed across the river registered 65,000 fish running upstream to spawn. In the 1980s, that number dropped to 500. Today the Selwyn state highway bridge crosses a dry riverbed. The river’s troubles are largely the result of abstraction of water for irrigation.



The expansion of dairying into low-rainfall areas such as south Canterbury is putting heavy pressure on a scarce water resource. “Dairying is possible in dry regions only with irrigation, and much of the water is taken from rivers,” says Bryce Johnson. “Farmers want most of their water when it’s hot and dry, just when the rivers are least able to supply it without damage to trout and other organisms. Local bodies have the right to temporarily suspend irrigation rights to preserve aquatic life but taking that sort of action is not going to win them any friends in local farming communities. So, they often turn a blind eye.”

It is not just the removal of water from rivers that is a problem. Water flowing back into rivers from farmland ferries a load of trouble: silt, faecal bacteria, nitrogen, and phosphate. In moderation, some of this material can be beneficial. New Zealand rivers tend to be low in nutrients, and some increase boosts life in the system. A Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries study of 100 rivers in the 1980s found that where up to 30 per cent of a river catchment was in pasture, water and trout suffered little harm. Beyond 30 per cent, deterioration commenced. Many of our catchments are way beyond 30 per cent.

Increasingly, agriculture is being identified as a major culprit in river decline. Yet agriculture has been the economic backbone of the country for a long time, and the amount of land in cultivation or pasture today (16.5 million hectares) is no greater than it was in the early 1900s. Certainly, farming is more intensive these days, but total animal numbers have remained more or less static over the past 30 years (fewer sheep, more cows) and a lot of land has been transferred from livestock to forestry, which is generally good for water quality—at least until harvest time. The Resource Management Act (RMA), which provides more enlightened environmental control than that which most of the world enjoys, has been in place for a decade. So why should our waterways suddenly be in trouble now.

More to the point, says Hayes, is that we are only now realising the extent of damage which has been steadily accumulating for decades. The degradation of water quality is a slow process which sometimes does not even register in the collective environmental memory. That is why it is important to document the changes, to realise that, for example, there were once trout of up to 10 kg in the Avon, in the very heart of Christchurch city. Or to listen to someone such as Frank Saunders of Waimate, who still fishes at the age of 97 and who can tell you just how much more alive our rivers were in his younger days; alive not only with trout but with bullies and mayflies and caddis and every swimming, crawling and flying insect, many of which have since disappeared, smothered by sediments, killed off by pollution.

Of course, agriculture cannot carry the can for all murky water and the corresponding reduction in trout numbers. Leachate from tips, mining operations and septic tanks and silt from subdivisions, roadworks and industrial development all contribute to the demise of trout. So, too, do natural disasters. Hayes says that part of the reason for continuing stream degradation is the incidence of infrequent, very large storms. Land in pasture is less well knitted together than forested land bound by tree roots. In flood conditions, such land—especially if it is steep country—is a slip waiting to happen. Although clearance may have taken place decades ago, with little apparent harm to a watershed, that land remains vulnerable. It is likely that more damage is done to a catchment under pasture by a one-in-20-years storm than was caused by a one-in-100-years storm when it was in bush.

Such damage can take a long time to heal. When a stream at Kapuni was severely affected by a big slip on Mt Taranaki, biologists found that aquatic life took 10 years to recover. Even in relatively unmodified country, streams can take a hammering from heavy rainfall. Anglers in Queenstown estimate it will be several years before favoured trout waters in their area recover from the November 1999 floods.

From both natural and human quarters, the country's waterways are suffering. What can be done? All parties agree that sustainable land management is the goal, and to this end Fish & Game, Federated Farmers and others have formed the New Zealand Landcare Trust, a group which seeks to mobilise land users to take collective responsibility for their own environmental impact. National coordinator Don Ross says the trust encourages farmers to reduce the effects of their activities on the land through such practical steps as keeping stock out of streams, taking better care of riparian strips, improving the retention of nutrients on pasture and monitoring water quality in conjunction with councils.

Bryce Johnson is positive about the work of the trust, which provides resources to 350 Landcare groups around the country, and praises the push towards sustainable land use, adding that, as a nation, we really have no other choice. Trout, after all, like their rivers the same way we do—refreshingly cool, crystal-clear and well shaded with trees. Even a quick glimpse overseas reveals a very unappealing alternative. Both the Wycombe Stream in England and Sonoma Creek in California, two of the very waters from which our brown and rainbow trout originate, have declined to the point where they are described as communal sewers.

Satisfying the needs of development and recreational use is no easy balancing act, and it is worth remembering that trout make a significant contribution to the national balance sheet. "Trout bring around \$600 million to the economy," Johnson tells me, "but what they signify is not just about money. We have always lobbied against trout farming, and the sale of trout, and any other form of putting a dollar value on the fish. In this country we still have a lifestyle and environment that most of the world envies, and we cannot afford to squander it. Trout are a part of our heritage, and you can't put a price on that."

**When I first** picked up a fly-rod three years ago, it was the mystique of the sport that attracted me, the sense of being inducted into an ancient order—the "Brotherhood of the Angle," as Izaak Walton called it. The lure of trout hooked me firmly through the heart, and, being of the barbed variety, has proved impossible to extract.

As I have fished my way up and down the country, I have been following a mental path other have walked before me. First it is the fish that is important, then the fishing, then, ultimately, neither: it is the context, the being there, the river itself. At that point, as the American writer Tom McGuane has observed, angling is more about capturing a truth than capturing a fish. Tonight, truth, trout and river are all part of a contemplative reverie. Outside, equinoctial gales are churning the surface of the lake by which I live into big swells and whitecaps, and sleet is buffeting the house. It sounds as if someone is throwing fistfuls of lead shot against the windows. The angling season will open in a few days; I saw my neighbour patching up his waders and airing them on the fence. I am sitting in my office tying flies.

I never thought it would come to this, for I had always considered fly-tying to be an activity for people who lacked something better to do. Now I take it back. It is not just coiling thread around

clumps of feather and fur. To tie these flies, I had to learn the life cycles of mayflies and caddis and damselflies, to distinguish beetle larvae from cicada larvae. I had to learn about insects with names like elderly *aunts*—*Zygoptera* and *Zephlebia*. I even met a world expert on stoneflies, a plecopterologist, and keep his telephone number handy should an emergency arise.

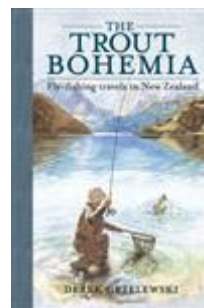
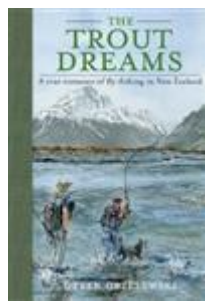
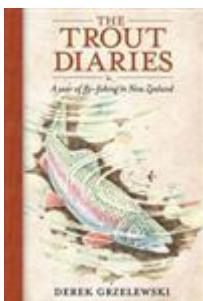
I have tied a few fancy flies—Slim Jims, Woolly Buggers, Lumi Zonkers—but usually I go for simplicity. Zane Mirfin, a Nelson Lakes fishing guide, once told me: “Fish eat bugs. Green bugs, brown bugs, and yellow bugs. Small bugs and big bugs. Whether you comb or not, it makes no difference to the fish.” So, I let my imagination roam and create my own monstrosities while Miles Davis purrs on the boom-box and beads of dew trickle down a glass of single malt.

And I think of the river that pours out of the lake and into a forested gorge, as good in the rain as it is in the sunlight, a river so clear I have no hesitation to drink from it. I like the feeling of its current pressing against my waist, squeezing the waders, and the wake forming on my downstream side as the river tells me, in a congenial sort of way, that I am, after all, just another annoying obstruction.

Soon I will be there, alone or with a friend, our only conversation the swish of fly-lines through the air. You do not talk a lot when you are fishing. You let the river do the talking. During those interludes of perfect stillness there are times of concentration so intense that the world as you know it no longer exists, for a few moments at least. Some people go to Himalayan monasteries or gaze for hours at a candle flame to feel this. I prefer the river and the mesmerising flow of its muscular current. And who knows, perhaps one day I will not even bother with a rod.

Ultimately, it does not really matter whether we fish for trout or not. The important thing is that they are there. They have become more than just an angling quarry, food for table or soul, an excuse to venture into the outdoors. Trout have come to embody pure, cold fresh water—the very elixir of life. In New Zealand, they seem particularly at home.

***Editor note - Derek Grzelewski has published a trilogy of books on his travel around New Zealand and fly fish which I have read and have sitting in my collection of books on fly fishing and tying, if you have never read one of his books I would recommend that you do. As you can see from this article, he is a particularly good author, he has a new book coming out in October Fly Fishing in New Zealand.***



## *The Imaginary Line by Landon Mayer*



**The best indicator is the trout itself when you are using the imaginary line to present to a fish. Use your peripheral vision to track the indicator as a reference of where the drift is going**

The simple details are what make you a better angler. One of my biggest learning moments in fly fishing was when I discovered the imaginary line. It was on the South Platte River in one of the prettiest sections of Colorado, Eleven Mile Canyon, in the summer of 1998. This setting at the base of towering round granite rock walls is a trout hunter's paradise, with a river that averages 6 meters or less wide, rattled with structure, riffles, pocket water, and deep plunge pools and water that looks like a freshly cleaned window.

I was watching a gorgeous red-sided rainbow eating emerging PMDs so hard it looked like an every-second event. I thought I knew exactly what to do, casting my presentation upstream with multiple mends, waiting for my indicator to move when it was near the target. Then while looking at the indicator as it passed by the trout, I saw the indicator move, and the fish I was looking at was still feeding while I had another fish on my rig.

At that very moment, the light bulb went off and I realized that what I thought was an accurate drift was not at all. In fact, it was the opposite. I was simply drifting to the water and not the fish. I then started putting the pieces together and creating the system I now use every day on the water—that imaginary line.



***Notice the angler in this illustration is casting past the drifting line above the trout.***

***This compensates for the natural direction of the drift, with tension toward the angler.***

***Once the fly enters the viewing lane, it is seen by the fish and drifts short of the target.***

Feeding fish starts with sight-fishing and seeing the target and leads to being able to deliver the fly more effectively when you cannot see the fish and have to rely on reading the water. All of this is possible by visualizing an imaginary line from the spot where your fly first lands, or you begin your drift to the trout's viewing lane for targets you can see or the prime feeding zone when reading water.

It is the same mental focus athletes from all sports around the world use to stay the course, whether it is a batter visualizing the next hit or a boxer ducking and visualizing the next punch. I literally try to visualize every drift and eat before it occurs. I used to refer to this technique as the "dotted line," and the system is still designed to be accurate with every cast to the trout's viewing lane, but I have learned over the years it is easier to stay on course with each drift or delivery when envisioning a continuous line without spaces or breaks.

Whether you are dead-drifting nymphs to a fish ploughing emergers, feeding a cripple to an active riser, or trying to lure a giant brown from an undercut with a furry streamer imitation, all of these actions require an imaginary line for the best accuracy and results!

### **Drawing the Line**

When you have located the target, or target area, the next step is to evaluate the water flow and depth upstream and around the fish. While doing this you are also giving yourself a chance to watch the trout's feeding habits: Is it lifting toward the surface, showing a preference for eating to the right, or simply wanting to be spoon-fed with the fly right above its nose?

Like a basketball coach drawing out the next play during a timeout, you will then begin drawing your own line above you will then begin drawing your own line above the trout to ensure the presentation will deliver the fly to the trout you see, or ensure a drift to the area of the fish.

When creating the line from reading water, look for areas where the trophy does not have to expend energy to consume its meal. Soft eddies of a turbulent run, drop-offs at the end of a riffle, and the edge of a shade line acting like a doorway to an undercut bank are all good spots for trout to remain lazy while they feed.

The line should start from the trout's head, or viewing lane, and travel the best current line 2 to 3 feet upriver for shallow runs and 4 to 8 feet for deep runs. In still-water scenarios, you want to cast to an imaginary line the trout will swim to. You need to watch the cruising fish to see if it is staying on a specific feeding path or moving at random. You can then make a leading line to a casting area.

The distance for lakes, ponds, and reservoirs is more than for a river because the surface can be calm, and the trout will feel or see disturbance easier. The distance to lead is not based on depth alone—you want to think shorter when the water has chop supplying the trout cover and long lines when it is calm.



## **“Should I Move or Stay Put?” by Skip Morris**



**Question:** *When you are fishing a pool, pocket, or riffle, how many unproductive casts should you make before you decide to move on to the next spot? And if you catch a fish in one place, should you assume that it has spooked the other fish in the area and move on? — Mort S.*

If deciding whether to abandon a chunk of water or stay and keep working it is not the most perplexing decision a new fly fisher must constantly face, it's got to be among the top one or two percent. Decades ago, I was new to fly fishing and struggled with this too; so, Mort, I sympathise.

Here is a good general rule: fish a piece of water until it stops putting out fish, and then try the next piece. What is a “piece of water?” Could be the head of a pool or a section of a riffle in a stream, a fallen log along a shoreline or all the water in front of you that's within casting range when your boat is anchored in a lake—simply put: some smallish fish-attracting structure or a manageable part of big structure. I know—that is way too broad to really answer your question, Mort. But we can narrow things down from there as we also explore some caveats.

### **The history factors**

If you're certain that the run before you holds a bunch of trout—something you know from having fished this stretch of river dozens of times at this very time of year and under these conditions—you'll probably start experimenting if six to a dozen presentations of your Royal Wulff move no fish. Next you might watch for insects on or in the surface of the water and match what you find with your flies. But if you see no rises and no real insects to match, you will probably next try a smaller or larger or just very different dry fly. Then, if that fails, a nymph. Then a different nymph. Then, if nymphs fail, perhaps a soft-hackled fly ...

You know there are trout, so you might as well figure them out here as somewhere else on the river. One thing is plain at this point: these are fussy trout. Maybe they are not fussy that often, maybe only rarely, but regardless, they are fussy right now. Better deal with that.

There will come a point though, after a bunch of fly and tactic changes, when you might decide to move along. The trout should be there, and according to your experience they should be

susceptible to certain of your tricks, but if none of its working, why not trade fly and technique variations for variations in holding water? There is a deep bank just upstream. Maybe if you make a few casts there ...

Whole different scenario: What if you know that this water holds only a small number of scattered fish? Then the answer's easy: Present the fly a few times at each likely spot, and then cover the next spot, then the next. After running the fly through, say, half a dozen spots without action, you would be wise to consider: Would a change of fly or tactic, or both, do the trick? If you have been fishing a dry fly on a trout stream, try a nymph. If you are fishing a hair bug on a bass pond, try letting a streamer fly sink a bit before working it slowly back.

### **Virtual history**

Knowing about the water you are fishing can really help you decide how long to stay on one spot even if you have never fished a particular stream or lake. Not knowing it first-hand—I mean fly-on/in-the-water wet-boat/wet-boots first-hand—does not mean you cannot know about it. You can ask at the local fly shop (as you purchase a few leaders both as a thanks for the info and to insure the shop's still around the next time you need it), you can do some research in fishing guidebooks, you can check on-line, you can ask members of your local fly-fishing club what they know. When the information from your various sources matches up, that is the best.

If you read or hear such points as “the largemouth bass in X Lake can be hard to find. Try around the inlet stream” and “the shoal in Lake Y is to the right of the boat launch and that's where the trout typically gang up” and “don't bother with the Z River after mid-August—it gets too warm and the fish go downstream and out” repeated various ways, you've probably got some solid information. (Though just because you hear something from only one of several sources, do not rule it out.)

Obviously, how long you stay on a spot fishing the Z River over Labour Day weekend is irrelevant: there are no fish to catch. X Lake is another matter: assuming your intelligence is accurate, you will need to do a lot of moving to figure out where bass are currently gathered. See? Your research will help you determine how long to fish one spot before trying another: specifically, with X Lake, quite a while around the inlet stream mouth, not long elsewhere on the lake.

### **Going in cold**

Let's say you have no history, actual or virtual, no information whatsoever on a lake or stream. Sometimes that is just the way things go. First, spend at least a full minute (it will seem like a quarter hour) just watching. Watching everything, from near your nose to a hundred feet away. Notice everything you can. Do you see the rise of a trout, or not? Do you see insects riding the water or is the top of the river bare? Are bluegills making their smacking sips in and around the weed beds, or not.

Second, read the water; that is, find a spot that likely holds fish: a riffle or a dock or a boulder field or whatever your target fish likes. Of course, if trout or panfishes or smallmouth bass are rising, or largemouth bass are splashing at dragonfly adults, then you do not need to find fish: there they are.

Third, approach with stealth—you have no idea yet how spooky these fish are or are not.

None of this really addresses the matter of how long to stay on a spot, but it will. Now, in fact. Let's say trout are rising; well, just go to work on them. And keep working on them until there are no more rises within comfortable reach. Then make a few test casts and, if nothing happens, move on.

But suppose the fish clearly are there yet you cannot get them to take anything? Perhaps they are feeding on top, or you can see them gliding or holding down in the clear water (or you just know they are there because you know this water well). That's really up to you. You can give them some time and experimentation and then go on and try some new fish. That might work. I usually just keep working a fish, changing flies and tactics, until I hook him, or I run out of time. Or, sometimes, if I grow tired of his attitude, which takes quite a while—I love the challenge of fish stubborn, cagey, or both.

Another common Scenario: zero trout are rising, and no bugs are appearing on the river. Try something logical, general—see if they will come up to a Parachute Adams. If they will not, try another spot, if that spot or the next one or two produce nothing, it's time to try various flies and methods on the assumption the fish are there but aren't liking what you're offering. Assumptions are what you must make when you have got no clues. Find a promising stretch of water, fish a likely fly, after a while try more water but with various flies and methods. Just makes sense, doesn't it, Mort?

So how long is "after a while?" I usually wait until I have presented a fly six to a dozen times before I figure nothing's going to happen. At least with a floating fly (dry fly, hair bug, etc.). I might make more presentations with a nymph in a trout stream or a streamer in a smallmouth lake—that is, with a sunken fly—because getting the depth and retrieve right may take some fussing. Still, two dozen presentations in this case should be plenty.

That is really about it, Mort: knowing when to leave a patch of water for the next patch is always a game of chance. Done best, it is a blend of experience, logic, foreknowledge, instinct. No matter how it is done, it always includes some degree of luck. At the high end of the luck scale is accidentally picking that just-right fly or depth on the first try, or finding fish where they really shouldn't be because on a whim you tossed your fly there as you passed by, and so on. But even though luck can be a lifesaver, you are wiser to rely mainly on what you learn and hone over lots of time spent on the water.

So get to know a stream or lake, Mort, keep returning to it, and eventually you'll have developed a strong sense of how long to stay in one place and how many flies and techniques to try before you leave it for the next place. Then you can apply all that understanding and experience to waters you do not know.

## *Jest about Fishing*

### **An Angel and Three Anglers**

Three guys were fishing in a lake one day, when an angel appeared in the boat. When the three astonished men had settled down enough to speak, the first guy asked the angel humbly, "I've suffered from back pain ever since I took shrapnel in the Vietnam War ... Could you help me?"

"Of course," the angel said, and when he touched the man's back, the man felt relief for the first time in years.

The second guy who wore very thick glasses and had a hard time reading and driving. He asked if the angel could do anything about his poor eyesight. The angel smiled, removed the man's glasses, and tossed them into the lake. When they hit the water, the man's eyes cleared, and he could see everything distinctly.

When the angel turned to the third guy, the guy put his hands out defensively — "Don't touch me!" he cried, "I'm on a disability pension."

### **What will my reward be?**

One day a fisherman was lying on a beautiful beach, with his fishing pole propped up in the sand and his solitary line cast out into the sparkling blue surf. He was enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun and the prospect of catching a fish. About that time, a businessman came walking down the beach, trying to relieve some of the stress of his workday.

He noticed the fisherman sitting on the beach and decided to find out why this fisherman was fishing instead of working harder to make a living for himself and his family. "You aren't going to catch many fish that way," said the businessman to the fisherman, "you should be working rather than lying on the beach!"

The fisherman looked up at the businessman, smiled and replied, "And what will my reward be?"

"Well, you can get bigger nets and catch more fish!" was the businessman's answer. "And then what will my reward be?" asked the fisherman, still smiling.

The businessman replied, "You will make money and you will be able to buy a boat, which will then result in larger catches of fish!" "And then what will my reward be?" asked the fisherman again.

The businessman was beginning to get a little irritated with the fisherman's questions. "You can buy a bigger boat and hire some people to work for you!" he said.

"And then what will my reward be?" repeated the fisherman.

The businessman was getting angry. "Don't you understand? You can build up a fleet of fishing boats, sail all over the world, and let all your employees catch fish for you!"

Once again, the fisherman asked, "And then what will my reward be?"

The businessman was red with rage and shouted at the fisherman, “Don’t you understand that you can become so rich that you will never have to work for your living again! You can spend all the rest of your day’s sitting on this beach, looking at the sunset. You won’t have a care in the world!”

The fisherman, still smiling, looked up and said, “And what do you think I’m doing right now?”



## ***Sabotage at Fish and Game by Dave Witherow***

*This article was written in Reponses to an article written by Tom O’Connor and published on Stuff NZ ‘Time for a change for Fish and Game’*

Recent reports of trouble within Fish and Game conform to a standard script which surfaces about once every decade. The whole organization is no longer fit for purpose, according to the critics, and it needs to be reviewed and reorganized if confidence is to be restored.

Tom O’Connor, writing on 9/5/20, rehashes most of this familiar terrain, spicing his case with allegations of dysfunction and malfeasance that bear no relation to reality. He does, however, get one thing right: Fish and Game, in being directly responsible to its stakeholders, is a unique organization - not just in New Zealand but in the world.

It is in fact a fine example of democracy in action, whereby anglers and hunters elect their own representatives to manage their own resources. It is regionally based, with twelve autonomous Fish and Game Councils, plus a co-ordinating body in Wellington, each employing professional staff, but with all councillor’s serving unpaid. Fish and Game is self-funded, making no claims on the public purse, but its work is of great benefit to the natural environment in general. Its record of achievement has often been noted by the present Minister of Conservation.

O’Connor refers to some of this record - the Water Conservation Orders that now protect many of our best surviving rivers. But he fails to acknowledge that it was the regional Fish and Game Councils - not the national office in Wellington - that did the essential work. And his whole perspective is coloured by his excessive focus on the Wellington operation.

The devolved nature of Fish and Game represents its strength and enduring relevance. Wildlife habitats vary dramatically from one region to another, and the differing management strategies



required are best determined by the people who live in each specific area. Techniques that are appropriate in Northland may make no sense in Southland.

This was well understood by the Acclimatisation Societies - the forerunners of Fish and Game - who operated very effectively for a century or more without the need for a separate presence in Wellington, which dates only from 1990. This body, the New Zealand Fish and Game Council, or NZC, has proved to be a mixed blessing.

“The latest upheaval”, as O’Connor puts it, is really no more than a storm in a teacup - a drive for power and central control by some within the NZC, helped along by a few self-interested external allies. It reflects the perennial bureaucratic urge to expand that has seen the Wellington office increase its staff by over 300% in thirty years.

There is no demonstrated need for this top-heavy establishment. The resources are in the regions, where all the vital work is done, yet in Otago and Southland, for example, staffing has remained more or less static during this same period.

O’Connor is concerned by recent changes in the composition of the NZC. Farmers have been appointed to the Council, he says, and a longstanding chairman has been dumped. The Director has simultaneously been muzzled in respect of his comments “on matters to do with farming” - and these “sinister” developments may not be unrelated. Farmers, he thinks, have a fundamental conflict of interest when it comes to many of the activities of Fish and Game, and on account of this they might arguably be unfit to serve as councillors.

This is fanciful and in fact nonsensical. Conflicts of interest are impossible to avoid in a country the size of New Zealand, and if all the potentially conflicted anglers and hunters stood down from Fish and Game Councils there would be very few councillors left. The “dumped chairman”, for example, was a fishing guide - an occupation involving numerous points of conflict with the founding principles of Fish and Game. Yet he served as chairman for years.

The biggest problem, according to O’Connor, is that there is insufficient separation between the NZC and the regional Councils. He attributes this to the composition of the NZC, which consists of one appointed councillor from each of the twelve regions. These councillors, as befits a national body, are reasonably expected to take a national perspective on the NZC’s business. But they often do not, according to O’Connor. Instead, they remain blinkered by parochial concerns.

To get round this O’Connor proposes that NZC councillors should be elected entirely separately from those in the regions, in the same way as local and central government representatives are independently chosen. We do not allow local bodies to select our MP’s, so why is this incestuous system tolerated within Fish and Game? Independence, in O’Connor’s view, would preclude any contamination by local “parochial” concerns.

It would be hard to think up a more crippling idea. There are no valid parallels here. Central government has entirely different areas of responsibility from local government - defence, education, policing, welfare, and foreign affairs, to name just a few. But Fish and Game’s interests remain the same at all levels, and its NZC office serves primarily as an interface with the government of the day in Wellington. The NZC has no functions that do not arise from

regional concerns. It manages no natural resources, and it generates no income - all its funds being supplied by the regions.

To suggest that this body be elected from a separate field of candidates, and to ban regional Fish and Game councillors from eligibility, would be to ensure a chaotic breakdown of the existing structure. All the ecological and managerial knowledge accumulated within the regions and fed back to the NZC through its regional representatives, would become unavailable. Such a council would be operating in a vacuum, flying blind.

There is nothing fundamentally wrong with the existing Fish and Game structure, and no valid reason for radical change. The NZC's role might usefully be more clearly defined, its surplus staff trimmed, and the recurring tendency to act as a governing body, directing the regions as it sees fit, should be ended. This level of authority was never part the original intention, and its persistence has caused much mischief.

In an era of unprecedented environmental degradation, it is inevitable that any voice for the protection of threatened natural resources will attract opposition from those whose interests lie elsewhere. No organization is beyond criticism or improvement, but to suggest a wholesale rearrangement of Fish and Game on the basis of the current overblown complaints is irresponsible.

Fish and Game has served anglers and hunters well for several generations, and its conservation mandate is of far-reaching benefit to the wider public. Throughout its history it has continually evolved and renewed itself in response to changing circumstances - an adaptability seldom matched by comparable institutions. It a unique example of Kiwi grassroots competence, and if the Minister is of a mind to review it, she should say so now, and make it an election issue.

***Dave Witherow served on the Otago Fish and Game Council for 39 years (1979-2018) and was the Otago representative on the New Zealand Fish and Game Council for more than ten years (until 2018).***

**Purpose:**

**To promote the art and sport of Fly Fishing.**

**To respect the ownership of land adjoining waterways.**

**To promote the protection of fish and wildlife habitat.**

**To promote friendship and goodwill between members.**

**To promote and encourage the exchange of information between members.**

**Club meetings**

You are invited to attend our club meetings that are held on the **Fourth Monday** of each month.

The venue is the **Turf Pavilion Sport Grounds**, Scaife Street, Paraparaumu,

Our **meetings start at 7:30pm** with fellowship followed by speakers of activities.

Club Committee meetings are held on the first Monday of each month and the meetings are held at various member's homes and start at 7:30pm.

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**Newsletter** Malcolm Francis: ph. 06 364 2101  
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**IMPORTANT NOTICE**

Please remember that the club has two Five Weight 8'6" fly rods that members are welcome to use, just contact Malcolm Francis.

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*Newsletter copy to be received by  
Second Monday of each month, your  
contribution is welcome just send it to:  
[malcolm1@xtra.co.nz](mailto:malcolm1@xtra.co.nz)*

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