

What the trout and stream deserve

A solitary, demanding devotion to craftsmanship and tradition defines the months of work it takes to produce a handmade bamboo fly rod, Cape master Stephen Boshoff tells **MICHAEL MORRIS**

THE LONE figure, the snaking line setting off glints of fleeting parabolas in the afternoon sun and the faintly humming stillness of a deserted spot are among the images that fix fly fishing in the popular mind.

With them goes an outsider's marvelling at the arcane skill of tying the intricate flies, the lures that tease the trout to the hook, and of mastering the sweep of the rod that lands the fly for a catch.

But the long prelude to the hunt – the crafting of the tools – is less widely appreciated, a process to which, in its most traditional form, urbanist and former director of planning in the City of Cape Town, Stephen Boshoff, attaches notions such as mystery, perfection, faith and a certain madness in dwelling with unforgiving judgment on the smallest margins of improvement.

The result of – for him – five months spent making a single bamboo rod, is an object of exquisite functionality.

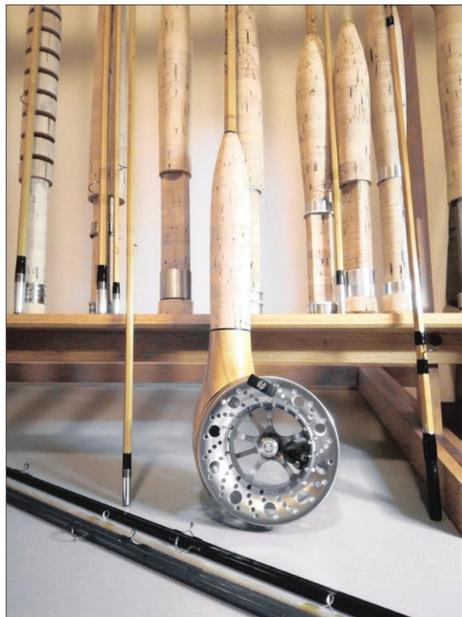
His work – nine rods and other handmade accoutrement such as nets, fishing baskets and fly boxes – will be on display alongside the craftsmanship of other skilled devotees at the Second SA Fly Fishing and Fly Tying Expo in Johannesburg later this month. Among top-ranked exhibitors will be Moreno Borriero, a highly respected South African-born Italian split cane rod-maker and fly fishing guide.

Most modern rods, almost all as superlative as they are pricey, are made of graphite and many on the show will be of this kind. Traditionalists call them “plastic sticks”, a differentiation which seems, but is not, snide; they acknowledge, functionally, graphite rods differ little from hand-crafted bamboo ones.

The real distinction lies in a kind of ethos summed in Boshoff's almost vatic conviction that “somehow, the specialness of trout and streams deserves the effort and dedication of handmade tools”.

This is, he suggests, “an offering to nature”.

If the ironic corollary of the craftsman's contemplation – and he admits that, more and more, he is tormented by the senseless harrying of fish – could well be that he stops fishing altogether, the making of rods, the craftsmanship itself, will go on. After 20 years of making, he said, his



Boshoff's innovation, the 'centre axis' reel fixed in the handle of the rod.

apprenticeship is complete; now is the time for the artist to himself to deepen.

Boshoff's journey in the craft has been long in maturing. His fishing origins, he said, are “not conventional”.

“I grew up in the largely troutless southern coast (in George) and spent most

'The 'feel' of a bamboo rod is the common voice of different hands, across continents, involved in its making'

weekends on the family farm in the Little Karoo.”

His late father, Petrus “Pik” Boshoff, was a teacher and began his career teaching woodwork, later settling in the Cape as a headmaster. Old man Boshoff was also a rock and surf fisherman. Thus, over a lifetime, his son's growing

familiarity with woodworking – from an early age he had “the freedom of the workshop” – and fishing converged in his rod-making. His early exposure to trout, however, was on that Karoo farm.

“The farmhouse had an enormous dining room, with a huge dining table as the centre piece, surrounded by open shelves, packed with my grandmother's crockery, as well as home-made preserves, biscuits, and other baked goods in a variety of jars and tins. I clearly remember one round cake tin. The lid had an artist's image of a boy on a stream with a cane pole, a float and his catch: a smallish speckled fish unlike the ones we caught from shore. To me, the fish was simply beautiful. Grandma's encyclopedia revealed its name: rainbow trout. So, the desire to catch one was established.”

He started fly fishing when the family moved to Somerset West and he was introduced to the region's trout streams.

Trout fishing in South Africa has a long history. As early as 1867, the Cape government passed a law supporting the introduction of fish to the Colony “not native to such waters” and, after some years, ova from Britain's



Rod-maker Stephen Boshoff puts one of his rods to the test in the wild. PICTURES: SUPPLIED



Tools Boshoff uses to master his craft.

Loch Leven and Andrews of Guildford were successfully hatched in Newlands and, in 1893, at the state-established Jonkershoek hatchery on the

Eerste River at Stellenbosch. The earlier Western Districts Game and Trout Protection Association was, last century, reconstituted as

the Cape Piscatorial Society, which today administers stream fishing in the Cape on behalf of Cape Nature.

In the post-apartheid period, the very existence of trout here as a non-indigenous species has been challenged and, with it, what Boshoff characterises as “deeper questions that plague our society” about “what constitutes indigeneity, authenticity and the right to belong or be part of South Africa”.

“In a positive turn of events, a process is under way to zone our prime trout waters and we wait for this process to be approved at national level.”

Every bit as intriguing is the journey of the bamboo itself, *Arundinaria amabilis* – or Tonkin cane – a very tall, stout grass native chiefly to the region around Aozai in China's Guangdong province.



Some finished rods, one bearing Boshoff's distinctive logo.

The poles, or culms, are cut by hand, carried to rivers where they are scrubbed by hand using river sand and then transported by the waterways to bigger centres where they are dried, sorted and bundled for shipping to the world. It is the subject of an award-winning film, *Trout Grass*, by David James Duncan.

Boshoff, whose culms follow this route, via Seattle, said of Duncan's documenting the transformation of bamboo “from harvesting in southern China to its shaping by rod-makers like me” that “when – in my world as an urbanist – I think that my craft is senseless, it serves as a reminder that nothing is more sensible.

“Perhaps the ‘feel’ of a bamboo rod is the common voice of the different hands, across continents, involved in its making.”

There's a measure of penance in his crafting, Boshoff confessed.

He grew up, he said, “in a family, where on Sunday no one fished; you went to church and Sunday school”, but that he “soon found more solace in the sermons of streams”.

“Perhaps I started making rods as a boy to continue putting my best foot forward and looking for forgiveness because I broke the family tradition.”

What came in its place was a devotion of a particularly demanding kind.

Each bamboo rod is formed by six lengths of finely cut culm, then hand-planed into triangular strips to a near infinitesimal degree of accuracy – tapering to a tip only a millimetre in diameter – and bonded with high quality epoxy to create a strong, springy hexagonal form.

To the attachments and finishes – Portuguese cork, Japanese silk, finely made ferrules and eyes and the varnishing – are brought painstaking attention and skill born of years of practice.

Boshoff has also developed an innovation – 10 years in the making – in which the reel



The raw material – bamboo or *Arundinaria amabilis*.

itself is incorporated in the handle of the rod, a “centre axis” style of construction he believes “makes the rod feel like an extension of your arm”.

His workshop, he reflects, “offers total control, and no excuses for failure”, the “antithesis” of his work as a planner, that is constantly subject to compromise, whim, interference, politics.

At his workbench, there is “only the history, the culture and the practice”, the result of which – as fly-fishing writer Tim Rolston has described it – is cane rods that are “more than tools, they are works of art”.

In Rolston's estimation, Boshoff's rods are bound to become “heirlooms in time, handed down from generation to generation”.

This calls to mind Boshoff's affection for novelist DH Lawrence's idea that “things men have made with wakened hands and put soft life into are awake through years with transferred touch”.

The craftsman as contemplative is borne out in Boshoff's readings, spanning everything from the secret life of fish to the canon of rod-making lore.

For more information on the Second SA Fly Fishing and Fly Tying Expo, go to www.fffexpo.co.za.

Energy options – controversial issues in the great national power debate

JASON MAST

IT'S a question that's been asked by politicians, environmentalists and ordinary citizens in recent months: Is nuclear energy the right answer, environmentally, for South Africa?

“The whole nuclear thing is so politicised. If you're for nuclear, you're supposedly for Zuma,” said Robert Lindsay, head of the department of nuclear physics at the University of the Western Cape.

Lindsay claims to be one of the few researchers in the country who's neither for nor against a nuclear programme in South Africa.

It's a particularly pressing question as US President Donald Trump has withdrawn from the Paris Climate Accord, making the burden of addressing climate change heavier on the rest of the world.

Nuclear power often conjures images of meltdowns at Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, and, most recently, the Fukushima accident in Japan that spilled large amounts of radiation into the ocean.

Anti-nuclear activists point to these incidents as the ultimate risk, but also as flashpoints to a larger problem

with energy produced from radiation: the radiation itself.

For more than six decades, nuclear reactors, which do not emit carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases, have been the only form of nearly carbon-free energy that can produce on a level with coal and oil.

Much of the debate today centres on whether, given the recent advancements in wind and solar energy, among other renewable sources, nuclear energy is still necessary.

“Why would you do that when you have much safer forms of energy available?” asked Liz Mcdaid, spokesperson for the South African Faith Communities Environment Institute, one of the two plaintiffs in the lawsuit that halted President Jacob Zuma's nuclear plan.

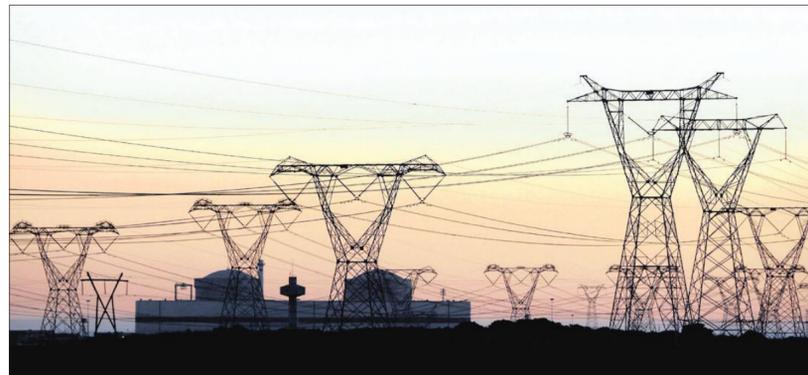
It's a question of danger and cost, Mcdaid said.

Some neutral or pro-nuclear researchers differ on the activists' assessment of the danger and relative cost.

They also disagree on whether South Africa can actually become carbon neutral without pursuing nuclear power.

When discussing nuclear power, radiation is among the first concerns.

“The entire chain of nuclear production is equally



harmful,” said Muna Lakhani, volunteer co-ordinator for Earthlife Africa, the other plaintiff in the nuclear lawsuit.

“This is from uranium mining to fuel manufacture, to radiation from reactor on a daily basis and of course all the high-level and low-level nuclear waste,” Lakhani said.

Lindsay, however, suggests the daily radiation from a plant is “absolutely minimal”.

“Just look at Koeberg,” Lindsay said. “I've measured radiation there, and the radiation it sends is absolutely minimal. It's not worth mentioning.”

Nuclear waste is an issue because it lasts thousands of years and no one wants it stored near them, Lindsay added, but it is not actually particularly dangerous.

“Researchers know how to cheaply and safely bury it,” he said.

Uranium mining has long been a thorn in the side of those who advocate nuclear power as the path to carbon-free energy. The mining, unlike the reactors, is somewhat carbon intensive and comes with attendant risks.

There are areas near the gold mines in Johannesburg –

where uranium was also mined – where mining waste is still giving off radiation and other toxic gases that contribute to silicosis, a lung disease that commonly affects miners and kills around 50 000 people annually around the globe.

“It's toxic and radio-active and is affecting the 1.5 million inhabitants living around the dumps,” said David Fig, an environmental sociologist and anti-nuclear activist who has written on uranium mining.

But South Africa's proposed nuclear project might not precipitate any further uranium mining, Fig said.

“Uranium is now incredibly cheap as nuclear has fallen out of favour globally, and it won't be cost-effective for mining companies to mine it unless the rest of the world starts building nuclear reactors again.”

At the moment, Fig said, South Africa can purchase uranium stockpiles cheaply. Lindsay pointed out that on any given night last year, South Africa was using 34 gigawatts (34 billion watts) of power, roughly 2% of which is wind-produced. That's a far stretch from a full renewable energy economy.

Pylons carry power from Koeberg nuclear power plant, near Cape Town.

PICTURE: REUTERS

“That has to be scaled up by factors of 50,” Lindsay said. “And then you have to hope the wind's blowing.”

Wind would not in fact be the only source in any renewable energy plan in South Africa, but it is the primary renewable energy source in all plans.

Mcdaid contends that South Africa can become carbon-neutral primarily by ramping

But under the 2030 energy targets of South Africa's current renewable plan, the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPP), is well short of being carbon neutral. Greenhouse gas emitting coal would still account for over 60% of the nation's power.

The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research – which declined to comment for this report, citing the highly politicised nature of the debate – created a “2016 re-optimised plan” that by 2050 would phase out and eliminate and have renewables accounting for 89% of South Africa's power. Wind, at 52%, would be South Africa's highest producer.

The CSIR's report says this would save R90 billion a year more than the Department of Energy's proposal of having 39% nuclear energy – and 11% coal – by 2050.

A full carbon-neutral economy, however, is almost impossible without nuclear energy. Solar panels and wind work well when it's sunny or windy but until energy storage becomes cheaper, they can't efficiently supply energy on a calm night.

Then you need “baseload power” – coal, nuclear and natural gas.

On any given night South Africa was using 34 billion watts of power

up wind and solar energy and by making consumption more efficient with so-called “smart grids” – electrical grids that continually measure and test the power usage in homes and then feed the appropriate amount – as opposed to old-fashioned grids that continually feed a steady stream of energy regardless entirely of the usage.