

controversy

by Peter Thorpe

STORY OF AN AFRICAN RIVER

At risk and betrayed

“Managers need to be aware that rotenone is not only toxic to target organisms like fish, but also potentially toxic to non target organisms, including humans.” — Dustin Hinson, *Rotenone characterisation and toxicity in aquatic systems*, University of Idaho, November 2000

HAS Cape Nature “Conservation” and its officials — and the anti-trout lobby — no shame? This was the question I asked myself when I heard that CNC official, Dean Impson, planned to remove trout, using the poison rotenone, from the pristine upper stretches of the Krom River in the Cederberg (www.kromrivier.co.za), ostensibly to “protect” the indigenous Clanwilliam rock catfish, *Austroglanis gilli*.

This is my story and the reasons why I ask the question. It is a story of a river and my exposure to people like Dean Impson and South Africa’s leading anti-trout lobbyist, Dr Jim Cambray, of



A Clanwilliam rock catfish photographed in the Krom River (above), and an angler casts a fly on the Krom (below).





Erosion below the polo fields — a development which went ahead without an EIA — on the Salt River, 20km east of Plettenberg Bay.

the Albany Museum in Grahamstown. The salaries of both men come from the public purse and, at the end of this account, I ask you to judge for yourself, as a matter of public and environmental concern and interest, whether the proposal to contaminate the Krom with rotenone is not an astonishing manifestation of double standards, hypocrisy and untenable environmental practice.

In 2000 I was the owner of Farm 236, *The Crags*, on the Salt River, 20km east of Plettenberg Bay. Having graduated from the JLB Smith Institute of Ichthyology at Rhodes University, and having been a flyfisher from childhood, I believed I had the knowledge and ability to create a successful flyfishing ven-

ture.

The area was heavily overgrown with wattle, pine and gum, but I started clearing it of invasive vegetation, believing that my application would earn the approval and official sanction of Cape Nature. The person responsible for processing that application was Dean Impson, who had graduated from the JLB Smith Institute a few years after me.

The financial interest in the syndicate/sectional title for ten cottages (hidden behind a hill and on stilts to minimise environmental damage) on the 300ha property was based on having some pristine river stocked with “wild” (stocked as fry) brown trout fishing available.



Today the Salt River is heavily silted and is infested with alien vegetation — wattle and gum. Herbicide, pesticide and fertilizer runoff has also taken its toll.

The primary reason (besides obviously making some income) was to try to save this beautiful stream as well as the land through which it ran. As a result, “Open Space Three” zoning was proposed for 90% of the land. The wattle was already encroaching, as were the pines and gums, but the land was restorable as long as a lot of money was thrown at it.

The brown trout I proposed stocking would not have posed a significant ecological threat, for two reasons. Firstly, I proposed stocking sterilised triploid trout so that they could not reproduce. Secondly, even if I had not stocked sterilised trout, they would not have been able to reproduce anyway because the water was too acid. Dr Douglas Hey, former head of Cape Nature, had stocked the Salt River in the 1950s, but the fish had not survived because, in such acid water (pH4), a colloidal coating forms over the eggs and smothers them.

I planned to grow indigenous proteas on the rest of the farm once I had removed the wattles and pine. I employed various experts under the leadership of Dr Malcolm Logie of BESC in East London to do an EIA.

When news got out about what I planned for the project, Dr Jim Cambray immediately drove down to Plettenberg Bay and a sustained campaign of public insult, vituperation and calumny against me began. Much of it was not just blatantly and deliberately false, but also libelous, and neither Cambray nor Impson uttered a word in my defence.

The thrust of the campaign against me was that the sterilised trout I would stock in three kilometres of water that had waterfalls at either end and water too warm for trout below the downstream waterfall, would eliminate the indigenous fish. When a study showed that the river was fishless, the anti-trout lobby, completely unfazed, suggested that my trout would eliminate species of aquatic insects. This despite there being any research anywhere in the world that proved conclusively that trout, on its own and without other contributory factors such a habitat degradation, had exterminated any form of fish or insect life.

At a public meeting, Cambray called for my farm vehicles to be confiscated and suggested that any EIA done should last for three years, during which time I would have no income.

Dean Impson then vetoed my project and I was forced to sell the property. The new owner, Charles Cornwell, a multi-millionaire and associate of the late Brett Kebble, went ahead with his development sans EIAs, scoping reports or any public interest meetings. He blasted the mountain, moved thousands of tons of soil to establish polo fields on what was previously sloped, uneven

land and established a huge stable. This has been mentioned in both *Noseweek* — “The dorp that can’t say no” issue 81, July 2006: “Charles Cornwall blew up half a mountain to make his polo fields”; and the *Sunday Times* — “Lara Croft tycoon leaves a trail of SA debt”, 10th February 2008: “...his playground was one of the world’s most exclusive polo fields, carved with explosives from the side of a mountain near the holiday town”.

Today the river is heavily silted, infested with alien vegetation, has surely been affected by the runoff of herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers used to maintain the polo fields, and has been reduced radically in flow as a result of the irrigation requirements of the polo fields. The balance of the 300 hectare farm where I planned to grow proteas (and which I had spent a lot of money clearing) is now covered in wind-seeded pine, wattle and gums.

Have Dean Impson and Dr Jim Cambray motivated and participated in a public outcry as they did with my proposed development? Did they protest? Did they come down to Plettenberg Bay and call for public meetings? Did they query the lack of EIAs? Not a word has been heard from them.

Their “principled” stand on behalf of the aquatic fauna of the Salt River, so fervent when I was the developer, was suddenly non-existent — their silence as deafening as it was craven. It’s one thing to stand up on behalf of the aquatic fauna of the Salt River when the developer is a relatively impecunious graduate of the JLB Smith Institute of Ichthyology, someone who is prepared to fund EIAs and expose himself to the hostility of the anti-trout lobby at public meetings. However, it’s something altogether different when the developer is a litigious man of immense wealth and an associate of one of the most notorious criminals in this country’s history. When we are talking about the impact on aquatic insects, dynamite, it would seem, suddenly becomes an environmentally and ethically preferable alternative to a few sterilised trout ...

I was quite happy to hold my peace on what was perceived as a betrayal of what they claimed their environmental principles to be, and to seek closure on my traumatic and financially debilitating exposure to the anti-trout lobby, until I heard of Dean Impson’s extremely contradictory plan to rotenone the upper reaches of the Krom.

On the Salt River he justified not stocking trout due to his concern about the aquatic insects. Seven years down the line he is quite happy, with World Bank funding, to wipe out an entire river ecosystem using the lethal poison rotenone (a South American ground



Following the development of the polo fields, the Salt River wetland has dammed up, and the flow of the river has been dramatically reduced.

root). This poison kills all gill (caudal *lamellae*) breathing animals by blocking the electron transfer process in the respiratory process, so say goodbye to all the inverts, tadpoles, fish and molluscs.

Rotenone will transform the Krom into an underwater desert, impacting on every element of the food chain, possibly permanently exterminating rare dragon- and damselfly species and causing hardship to the crab-eating otters, to name but one species. Why? Because there is a small population of trout in the upper reaches that has reached a decades-old equilibrium with the indigenous fish and has certainly not eliminated them.

Impson’s apparent *modus operandi* will be to electroshock the Krom, remove the trout and the indigenous rock catlets, and then keep the catlets in aquariums for re-stocking when and if the river ever recovers from the subsequent poisoning with rotenone.

There is no doubt in my mind that this process will decimate the catlet population. Electro-shocking will be ineffective because of low conductivity in such mountain streams. And because much of the heavily-bushed Krom is inaccessible for electro-shocking anyway, far more catlets will die from the subsequent rotenone poisoning than will be recovered by electroshocking. Also, on page 67 of the *South African Red Data Book*, author Paul Skelton says, “Specimens have been kept with limited success in aquariums.”

Trout form the basis of an industry that in terms of job creation, enhancing property values, tourism and food production adds billions of rands to our economy. I call on the authorities to

ignore the anti-trout lobby which has already done enough harm, and to halt this ill-informed project without further ado.

Let them concentrate, rather, on a far greater threat to our indigenous fish and aquatic insects — habitat degradation — instead of turning a blind eye and remaining silent as they have in the past. Examples of this shirking of their duty on environmental matters abound, and include the dredging of witvis rivers like the Hex and the Breede; the building of campsites and barrier weirs on one of the last remaining breeding grounds of the Clanwilliam yellowfish and sawfins on the Driehoeks River, close to the Krom River in the Cederberg; the building of a huge development right on the water’s edge of the Smalblaar River; and the once pristine Amandelstroom tributary of the Hex being reduced to a bone-dry watercourse by vineyard irrigation.

These situations have all been met with as much silence and as little opposition from Cape Nature and the anti-trout lobby as there was when half a mountain side was blasted away on the Salt River.

Now, as a morally and environmentally reprehensible encore, they want to destroy an entire aquatic ecosystem on the Krom!

I ask you, where is the logic? Have they no shame?

For CapeNature’s response, see overleaf.

References: Hinson, D. 2000. *Rotenone characterisation and toxicity in aquatic systems. Principles of environmental toxicology*, University of Idaho <www.agls.uidaho.edu/etox/resources/case_studies/ROTENON2.PDF>