

TROUT AND NATURE CONSERVATION: ARE THEY COMPATIBLE IN THE WESTERN CAPE?

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Introduction

Trout and nature conservation have mutual origins in this country as in many other developed countries the world over. This is particularly true for the former Cape Province, and especially Cape Nature Conservation (CNC).

The trout hatchery in the scenic Jonkershoek valley is really where it all started. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of this historic trout hatchery, Cape Nature Conservation arranged a special function towards the end of 1993 and consequently had the original old trout hatchery declared a national monument.

Although Jonkershoek continued to function as a trout hatchery for virtually its entire existence, it is here where, in the early 1940's as the then Inland Fisheries Department, and in 1952 as the Department of Nature Conservation (of the Cape Provincial Administration), that nature conservation in South Africa really had its origins. All provincial conservation departments in this country have somehow had their roots in Jonkershoek, in that at least former directors of each of these organisations started off as juniors at Jonkershoek. It is, therefore, fair to say that nature conservation and trout angling have always been closely linked and associated in this country.

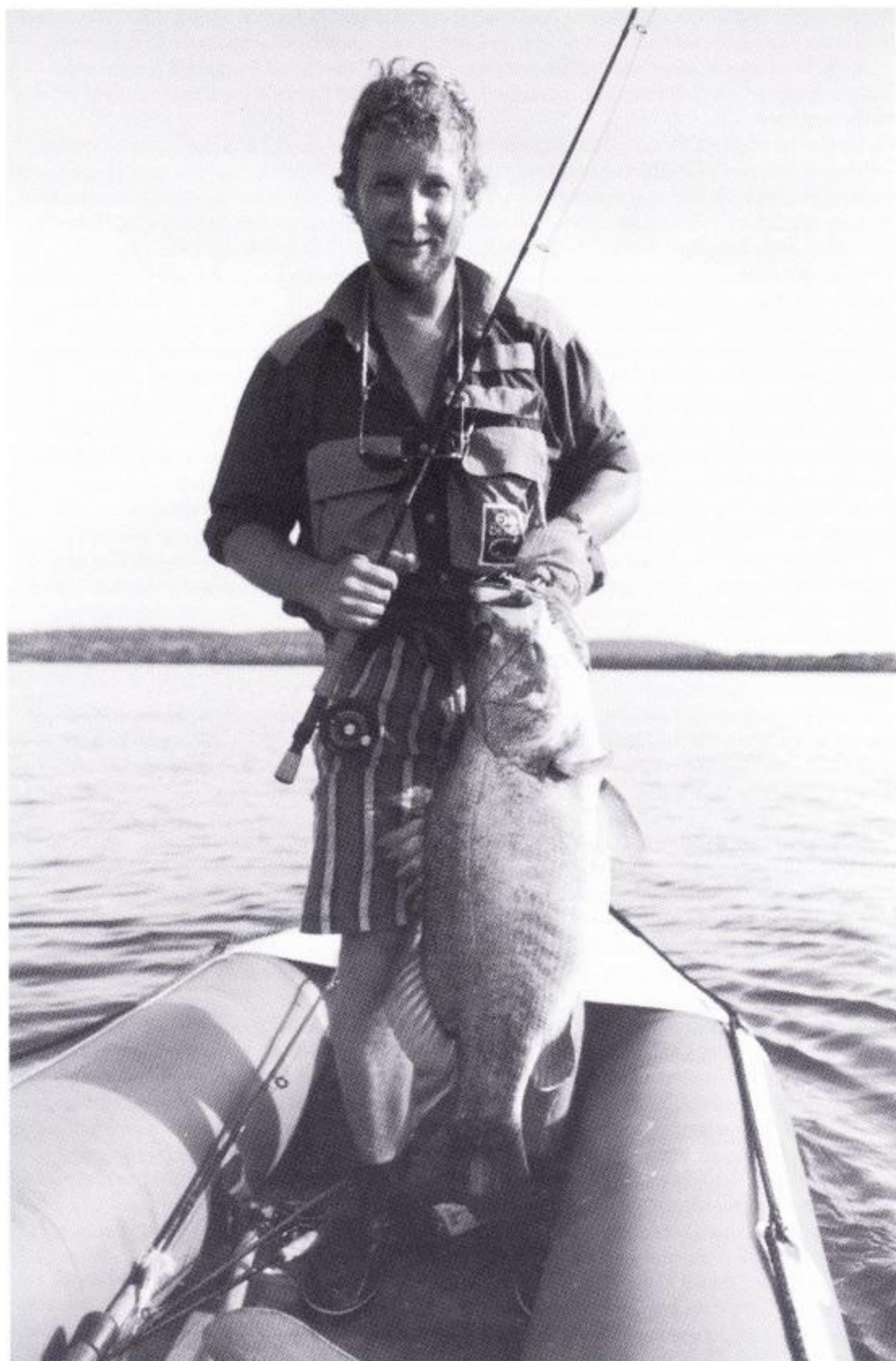
In those early years the primary objective of these authorities was to improve angling and ensure that trout and other alien and translocated fish species were distributed in as many inland waters and rivers as possible. These introductions were, as in many parts of the world, to a large extent successful and this unfortunately contributed in some cases, to irreversible damage to numerous sensitive aquatic habitats and ecosystems.

Policy changes over the last decade

In a modern dynamic world, it is imperative that nature conservation organisations are flexible and pragmatic in their attitude and approach towards policy development. Policies adopted and decisions taken by these organisations need to be challenged and adapted to accommodate new situations that regularly arise due to new perceptions and also improved knowledge and understanding. These concepts also apply to CNC's policy development with regard to trout. Prior to the mid 1970's, this organisation's policy was primarily orientated towards the breeding and stocking of alien and translocated fish into natural and artificial waterbodies for angling purposes due to a perception that indigenous species were worthless for angling or as a food source.

As outlined by Hamman (1986), this policy was in conflict with the primary function of CNC which was the conservation of the indigenous fauna and flora of the Cape Province. Research findings and literature citations since 1943 indicate that of the 38 indigenous freshwater fish species that occur in the Cape Province, more than 50% can today be considered threatened (Barnard, 1943; Jubb, 1959, 1966; Gaigher C., 1973 a,b, 1981; Gaigher L., 1975, 1979; Gaigher et al., 1980; Cambray and Stuart, 1985; Hamman, 1986; and Skelton, 1977, 1987). Major reasons for this poor conservation status are habitat destruction and the presence of certain invasive alien fishes, especially black bass, carp, bluegill sunfish and to a lesser extent trout, and the negative impact of translocated indigenous fish species such as the sharptooth catfish, and vlei- and blue kurper.

Skelton (1987) reviewed the *Red Data Book* (Skelton 1977) for southern African fish and an alarming further 50 species were added to this list representing an increase of 78% (from 28 to 78 species). Several species are now classified as either endangered, vulnerable or rare and alarm bells



Gary Haselau with another, smaller Nile Perch

began ringing within various Nature Conservation organisations during the 1980's. CNC was indeed very concerned as the number of Cape species listed during the period mentioned increased from 12 to 16. In a future third revision of the *Red Data Book for fishes*, an additional six species will without doubt be added for the area within the boundaries of the former Cape Province, if the present trend continues unabated.

During the mid 1980's, a decision was taken accordingly to review CNC's nature conservation ordinance and remove legislation protecting alien angling species such as bass and trout (e.g. closed seasons, bag and size limits, flyfishing only). This decision, however, was only taken after a lengthy process of relevant information dissemination to all angling interest groups. In 1989 CNC halted its own production of trout and made the Jonkershoek hatching facility available to Stellenbosch University for genetic experimentation on trout. At this stage a number of private trout hatcheries in the Western Cape were also able to supply the stocking needs of organised trout angling of that particular area. CNC subsequently turned its attention towards maximising the use of available manpower, facilities and dwindling funds to the artificial breeding of threatened indigenous species such as witvis, Clanwilliam yellowfish and some of the endangered redfin minnows.

For CNC, the paradigm shift became a reality, but unfortunately this decision was met with a storm of protest and rage, particularly within the vocal flyfishing fraternity which in some isolated and uninformed quarters continues to this day. The viewpoint of many trout anglers was that CNC was selectively discriminating against trout angling. This at a time when the sport contributed much towards tourism, regional and national economies, as well as increased conservation awareness amongst the public, while other threats to conservation were ignored or inadequately dealt with.

CNC's intention was, however, not to discriminate against any angling sport in particular, but rather, firstly to send a clear signal to the public that the conservation status of our indigenous species was in a perilous state and that every effort should indeed be made to save this valuable heritage. Secondly, it was also time for CNC to notify organised angling that it would in future have to control, regulate and manage their own interests, as trout and bass fishing could no longer be regarded as a conservation subsidised activity.

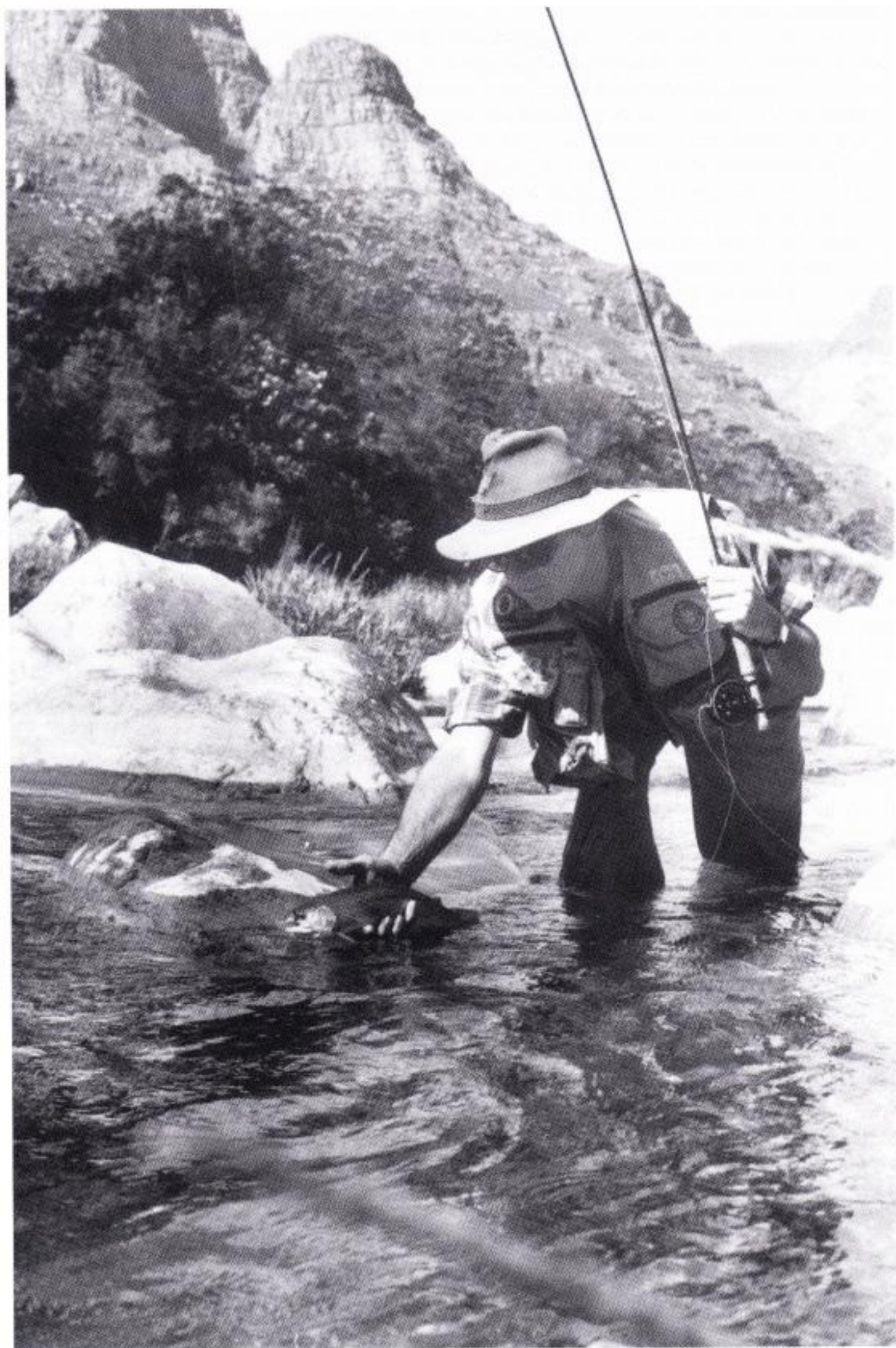
In retrospect it seems that CNC erred in the manner in which the decision was taken, even though there was process of public involvement and subsequent communication, especially to the trout angling fraternity. Today, however, it is clear that this decision, from the point of view of nature conservation, was quite correct.

Constructive cooperation between CNC and the trout angling fraternity

The 1990's has seen CNC consolidating its policy on the management of freshwater ecosystems, which included a more holistic approach towards trout angling and trout production. Significant progress has also been made towards the development and streamlining of the artificial breeding of several indigenous species, including those with excellent angling potential such as the Clanwilliam yellowfish, the sawfin and witvis. In addition, interaction and communication with the trout angling fraternity has continually improved.

An example of this development was the devolution in 1993 of angling control in recognized trout streams in the Western Cape (e.g. Witte, Elandspad, Holsloot and Molenaars) to the Cape Piscatorial Society (CPS). This mutual agreement allows the CPS direct management and control of prime trout angling areas and it provides regulating opportunities to control angling pressure, stocking densities, the determination of angling methods and an ability to cover the financial outlay for their efforts. The aesthetic and wilderness qualities of these waters are also vastly enhanced by the magnificent mountain fynbos surroundings which are managed by CNC to maintain their rich biodiversity and to ensure regular water supply of high quality to various users.

Cape Nature Conservation, on the other hand, benefits from this relationship by the increasing number of flyfishermen who visit these areas annually. These anglers can and often do act as the "eyes" and "ears" for CNC and concerned members of the public by reporting incidents of river pollution and habitat destruction (often ironically caused by trout farming activities), untimely veld fires, etc. Trout anglers without doubt also see these mountain catchment areas as a sensitive and unique resource and will support CNC in any fight against insensitive and inappropriate development here.



Tom Sutcliffe on the Holsloot. Picture by Ed Herbst.

Concluding remarks

CNC has grown over the past 50 years, from the then Inland Fisheries Department, which indiscriminately distributed various kinds of alien fish species into virtually all rivers of the Cape Province, to an organisation which today has as its prime mandate the wise management of representative components of the terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems of this region.

Although introduced trout may pose problems to the indigenous fauna of South Africa and are therefore regarded with mixed feelings by environmentalists, here and abroad, it is recognised that they are highly desirable for the original purpose for which they were introduced. There is thus a place for trout in South Africa today, just as there is a place for the 240 or more indigenous fish species of Southern Africa (Bruton 1986).

Organised trout fishing in South Africa has, without doubt, contributed towards the development of a positive attitude and greater awareness of this sector towards the natural environment. Let us then continue to work together for the benefit of all concerned. For references or queries relating to references, please contact the authors at Cape Nature Conservation, Private Bag X 9086, Cape Town.

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