

CHAPTER FOUR

The Trout Wars



They tell me that everywhere there are lines which can never be crossed. They tell me that there are places where the mind should not venture, or that if it does, the mouth may under no circumstances follow, that what is discerned out there beyond the edge can never be divulged to any living mortal. It is useless even to try. Any attempt to do so can only end badly. This is what they tell me ... So who am I to blow against the wind?

WOLF AVNI¹

*Creeps and idiots cannot conceal themselves for long
on a fishing trip.*

JOHN GIERACH²

Until 1986 trout in South Africa enjoyed greater legal protection than any other freshwater fish in the country: state-sponsored propagation; strict enforcement of the fly-only rule; closed seasons

on rivers during spawning time; minimum sizes; stringent bag limits; and so on. However, in January of that year what was then known as the Cape Department of Nature and Environmental Conservation (CDNEC) announced that it wished to remove all protective legislation from exotic fish, including trout.

The motivation for this action had some merit. As a state-funded body, the CDNEC saw its role as protector of indigenous species. It argued that there was little sense in its enforcing legislation directed only at preserving alien species, and investing its funds and person power in the production of alien fish for stocking purposes.³ While the environmental rationale may have been sound, the implementation, public consultation and communication processes, however, were disastrous, leading to what became known as the ‘trout wars’.

Though the 1986 wars finally ended in a truce, many of the hostilities, suspicions and resentments created on both sides resurfaced when the status of trout and other alien species was again brought into the spotlight by the 2004 National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act. It seemed, however, that conservation bodies had learned from previous mistakes, and so engaged in an extensive process of consultation. In an article in the magazine *Flyfishing*, well-known trout fisher and flyfishing author Ed Herbst commented that not only did Ernst Swartz – of the South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity and a key figure in the process of fish zoning – not have horns, but his CV was ‘based on impeccable origins’ because of his prior involvement with the Cape Piscatorial Society.⁴

Exacerbating the situation in 1986, and leading to accusations of partiality and selective interpretation of scientific evidence, was the fact that other provincial conservation bodies, most

notably those in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, did not support the CDNEC's position. Although it was easy to construe the CDNEC's position as being individually motivated or perverse, in the CDNEC's defence, it is a department working to conserve a region with the highest number of endemic and threatened indigenous fish species in South Africa.

The CDNEC has since admitted, however, that it handled the situation badly, including allowing the debate to be personalised, as highlighted by Johan Neethling's comment about trout anglers being elitist, as quoted earlier. On their side, trout anglers, and especially trout farmers and owners of recreational fisheries, regarded the proposed legislation changes as nothing less than an assault on their valued pastime or livelihood. Even the generally diplomatic Tom Sutcliffe was moved to use the extreme political rhetoric of the National Party in arguing against the CDNEC's position – and talked of a 'total onslaught'. Emphasising the value of trout as 'perhaps *the* most desirable freshwater game fish, combining tremendous fighting power with a discerning wariness and a powerful instinct for self preservation', he argued that the long history of trout fishing in the country meant that it is now 'firmly established as part of the South African way of life'.⁵

Like many other contributors to the debate, Sutcliffe stressed the environmental awareness of trout fishers, and accused the CDNEC of 'selective discrimination' in targeting species such as trout, rather than tackling larger problems of 'overgrazing, over-irrigating, ploughing along the very edges of river banks, pollution and riverine afforestation'. He stated forcefully that '[w]e find it very difficult to relate sympathetically to such a one-sided philosophy and most anglers, I'm afraid, regard the utterances of this department as the vicarious dilations of some whimsical

academics, who would wilfully bring their own ideologies into risk of head on collision with a powerful national asset'.⁶ On a personal note, for me as an academic in the humanities who has frequently to defend the validity of our research against that of the 'hard sciences', there is a delicious irony in hearing biologists' positions described as the 'vicarious dilations of some whimsical academics'.

At a colloquium hosted by the J.L.B. Smith Institute of Ichthyology on 9 April 1986, recorded in the Special Issue No. 1 of the journal *Ichthos*, Sutcliffe was supported in his stance by prominent members of the pro-trout lobby: Bob Crass, P.B.S. Jackson, Fred Crony and Martin Davies. The counter-argument was put by P.H. Skelton from the J.L.B. Smith Institute and K.C.D. Hamman from the CDNEC, both of whom stressed the need to 'manage' any threat that trout or other alien fishes held for indigenous species. An ameliorative voice was provided by Mike Bruton of the J.L.B. Smith Institute, who said at the outset of the colloquium, 'It is my belief that there is a place for trout in South Africa today, just as there is a place for the 240+ indigenous fish species in the subcontinent. It is our role to define that place today.'⁷

The virulence of the 'trout wars' and the ease with which the CDNEC's position could be regarded as being 'anti-trout' and the 'thin end of the wedge' in removing trout totally from the South African landscape are not difficult to understand. The CDNEC wished to shed responsibility for protecting alien species, which had been legally protected and actively propagated by the state for almost a century. At the same time, however, the body did not have in place mechanisms for transferring that responsibility to any other body, whether fishing clubs or private organisations.

The desperately overfished state of much of our coastline

is testimony to the fact that, even with legislated controls in place, fish populations are extremely vulnerable. In the case of trout, which are confined to very specific areas by their physiological requirements, removing protective measures such as closed seasons, bag limits and restrictions on modes of fishing would effectively have decimated the populations, and potentially meant the end of trout fishing as pastime and livelihood in South Africa.

After what Sutcliffe referred to in his book *Reflections on Flyfishing* (1990) as 'A Close Call at the Cape', things quietened down again, and the responsibility for managing and protecting species such as trout and bass was handed by the CDNEC to angling societies such as the Cape Piscatorial Society and the South African Bass Angling Association – though the department did provide assistance in securing rights for these bodies to designated trout and bass waters. There were scars on all sides, but the future of trout seemed secure.

However, and perhaps most significantly, it was through the 'trout wars' that the debates about trout in South Africa began to be publicly constructed in terms of 'indigeneity' and 'alienness'. And a fish species that had previously been actively introduced, nurtured, valued and protected by the state now represented for some an undesirable 'otherness', which should be regarded with suspicion, if not outright hostility.

There was a brief and highly visible skirmish about trout in these terms when Jim Cambray of the Albany Museum published a piece in the *Mail & Guardian* in which he called on policy-makers to act against alien fish 'even if it means the end of trout'.⁸ Sharp responses followed from Ed Herbst and Robert Kirby, questioning both the emotiveness and selective scientific

evidence behind Cambray's argument.⁹ In his characteristically caustic mode, Kirby referred to Cambray's 'fatuous adjudications' and 'gloriously diligent hysteria'. After publishing Cambray's response to Herbst and Kirby, the newspaper declared correspondence on the issue closed.



It's bitterly cold and raining. I head my truck up the road to Underberg, conscious of the fact that it is already rather late in the morning. What seemed like a good idea – a quick visit to my brother and his family who are staying at Lake Naverone – seems increasingly foolish, as the weather makes any speed impossible. When I finally turn into Naverone, it is close to lunchtime, and the mist obscures almost everything. Inside the cottage, the fire is blazing, and fine aromas emerge from the kitchen. I haven't seen my brother for a while, and the conversation bats back and forth easily. Outside, the weather is arctic, so we linger over lunch, pausing only to stoke the fire.

Despite the cold, there is no wind, the lake looks promising, and we must fish. Brushing aside my rather plaintive request to join him in the boat – 'There won't be enough freeboard,' he says – my brother leaves me to the pleasures of my float tube and leaky neoprene waders. Although I can't help but wonder how being the captain of a tanker of some 40 000 tonnes qualifies him to pronounce with such authority on the carrying capacity of a 10-foot rowing boat, I acquiesce. Once I'm on the water, thoughts of cold and the long drive back dissipate. In the depths, a fish takes my dragonfly nymph, and after a brief battle is released to fight another day. The rhythm of fishing kicks in, and Ken and I drift in

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*and out of earshot of each other, casting lines over the calm surface.
A few more fish come, but finally the lure of the fire and a warm
drink prove too much for us.*

*Catching trout with my brother. This is a spot of time, a blessed
opening in the mist.*



When the trout debate resurfaced in 2004 in relation to the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act, which I discuss later in some detail, the rhetoric often had uneasy overtones of biological and human-racial ‘purity’, which are bizarre given the complexities and enfoldedness of our history as a country and region.

Something of the extreme and problematic nature of these arguments can be exemplified by looking in more detail at the writings of Jim Cambray, a virulently anti-trout campaigner whose response seems often in line with that of Mr Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*: ‘Exterminate the brutes!’ In a piece in the on-line journal *Science in Africa*, Cambray begins:

Think about that fish you just caught? There you stand with your proud catch of a 2-kilogram rainbow trout. Have you ever stopped to think if this fish is indigenous or not? You look around, the river is beautiful, a nice flow, lovely indigenous vegetation, a lovely rock face where the river meanders towards you, ah this is perfect. Not so.¹⁰

Personally I do not know of a single flyfisher – let alone anyone skilled enough to take a 2-kilogram trout from a

river, which is no mean feat – dim-witted enough to imagine that trout are indigenous to South Africa (any more than a Volkswagen or Toyota driver is likely to consider that this is a South African marque, although Volkswagen and Toyota, like trout, may originate from another continent but are ‘made in South Africa’).

Cambray’s argument has the sophistication and finesse of my Great Dane Moses eating spaghetti. His piece is provocatively entitled ‘Time to Mop up the “Alien Fish Spill”!’, and he says: ‘If we pollute the stream with chemicals or pollute it with alien fish species which will eat or compete with them for resources we loose [sic] aquatic biodiversity.’¹¹ In the metaphor that gives him his title, he claims, ‘You may even equate [the eradication of alien species and the reintroduction of indigenous species] to the recent oil spill disaster which threatened penguin colonies in the Cape. On the freshwater fish side we have had a “spill of alien fish species” [and] these now have to be mopped up.’¹² Even though he claims to be mounting his argument in defence of ‘biodiversity’, Cambray’s use of the language of ‘pollution’, ‘contamination’ and ‘cleansing’ is very worrying, and – while I assume that this is not his intention – echoes arguments for racial purity and the most conservative and aggressive of nationalisms – evident in the stridently anti-alien accusations of ‘taking our jobs’ in the 2008 xenophobic attacks.

The definition of the indigenous that underlies Cambray’s argument is also telling: ‘Those waters in which you cast your trout fly should hold populations of indigenous species which have evolved with the system over many thousands of years.’¹³ So, what is to be protected is a ‘notional’ ecosystem that predates the arrival of the Bantu peoples in the subcontinent, and does not allow the movement of human, animal and plant species around the

globe that has characterised – for better and worse – the history of earth over many thousands of years.

Cambray's position is one that the human geographer Paul Waley refers to as an eco-nationalism: 'a quasi-official' model of ecology 'glorifying a pure past age predating Western [and, I would add, other African] influences'.¹⁴ This 'eco-nationalism' is under assault by what Cambray calls 'true eco-terrorism', which comprises the introduction of alien species.¹⁵

Since some of the most significant threats to riverine ecologies and biodiversity have arisen through agriculture, and its need for water and the ploughing of soil for crops or pasture, it seems that Cambray's idea of what should be conserved harks back to a 'pre-colonial Eden' of Khoisan hunter-gathering. Kirby makes a similar point in his response to Cambray's 1997 *Mail & Guardian* piece:

A distinction always needs to be made between desirable and undesirable exotic species. Clearly the elegant trout falls into the former category. If it does not, we may as well go all the way in obeying the frenzied counsel of the Cambrays of this world. While we are getting rid of all our trout and bass, let's uproot all our fruit trees and our wheat and maize fields and vineyards; let's slaughter all the exotic cattle and sheep, goats, dogs, poultry; rip up all our ornamental bushes and shrubs, the flowers and vegetables. Let's go back to eating grubs and maroela berries.¹⁶

Yet even Khoisan peoples are regarded as having been responsible for species migration: the 'castor oil' bush, used by them for medicinal purposes, is believed not to have been present in southern Africa prior to their bringing it here. The geographer William Denevan makes a more extensive argument in this

regard about the changes wrought on the North American continent by Native American people prior to European arrival in 1492.¹⁷ Quite why trout in South Africa should bear the weight of this history, and become the sacrificial scape-fish in this complex scenario (in which Cambray's own presence as a Canadian in South Africa may also be construed as intrusive) remains unclear.

Cambray's thinking is also insufficiently aware of more complex recent ecological thinking, and relies instead on decidedly simplistic notions of the relationship between 'Humans' and 'Nature'. Paul Waley argues that '[n]ew ideas of ecology have led to a readjustment in conceptualisations of landscapes and human habitats'. The 'deleterious impact on local fauna of habit fragmentation is recognised', but 'a more sophisticated and nuanced reading of the relationship between animal habitats and human moulding and re-moulding of landscapes has been forged'. Waley quotes the academic Kay Anderson, who points out, for example, that 'suburbs have become ecosystems of their own, though humans are probably unaware of their part in attracting the wildlife with whom they coexist'.¹⁸ Such a model can understand the expansion of peregrine falcon populations in cities such as Cape Town, goshawks in suburban gardens across South Africa, foxes in the urban areas of the United Kingdom, and, yes, the establishment of trout populations in artificially constructed stillwater impoundments, with the associated growth of otter, waterfowl and fish eagle populations.

One of my most memorable moments in this regard was fishing Bluegum Dam on the Lourensford Estate, and hearing the call of one of the resident fish eagles echo back off the high krantzies three or four times. As fish eagles require waters in which fairly large fish are present and may be seen from the surface, trout

dams are ideal for them. At the Oak Tree Pools at Lourensford, the stocking policy specifically allows for the predation of trout by the resident otters, which are also attracted by and consume the healthy population of crabs. I have had numerous encounters with otters while float-tubing stillwaters, some of which have swum around and under me for long periods, as well as encountering them on the rivers. On one of my favourite stillwaters in Underberg, Isabella, I spent an hour or two in the company of a juvenile dabchick, which had clearly decided that I looked, in my float tube, with flippers and rod, for all the world like its mother. Less welcome were the snakes at Palframan's and Highmoor dams, which tried repeatedly to board my float tube.

Of course, the expansion of animal populations in relation to human settlement has its problems, as the complexities of human-baboon symbioses indicate. While the unintended introduction of 'alien' species would generally be regarded as a threat to indigenous populations of fish, an article in *Flyfishing* speculates that the spread of grass carp into the Vaal River system appears to have benefited indigenous species such as smallmouth yellowfish and moggel, as well as improving water quality.¹⁹

Cambray is correct about some of the mistakes made:

Even in the Olifants River in the Western Cape, bass and trout were introduced as angling species. This was even at that time ridiculous as this river had one of the finest and largest species of yellowfish, which was an excellent angling species. Suffice it to say that these embryonic conservation bodies made a huge mistake. This is historical and at the time it was happening around the world. That it still happens today is difficult to defend with the knowledge we have today.²⁰

What Cambray fails to mention is the introduction of trout into waters in which there were no angling or edible species. He also does not mention the turn in recent years, along with the continued pursuit and valuing of trout, towards flyfishing for indigenous species, especially yellowfish. Catching a yellowfish on a fly is probably regarded far more highly than a trout in most circles, and that esteem has seen even famous trout waters such as Sterkfontein Dam transform, with the full support of flyfishers, from a stillwater stocked with trout to one revered for its wild-spawned yellowfish. Intriguingly, flyfishing for indigenous freshwater species in South Africa, especially yellowfish, whitefish and tiger fish, was documented as early as 1920 and 1923 by Bertie Bennion, and by 'Kingfisher' (Fred Bowker) in 1938.²¹ While continuing to defend the presence of trout in the country, the Federation of Southern African Flyfishers (FOSAF) formed the Yellowfish Working Group in 1997 to lobby for conservation of these species.

Also absent from Cambray's argument is any mention of the fact that trout fishers were the first in the country to introduce the principle of catch and release, a conservation practice that is rapidly spreading to other forms of angling, to promote the use of barbless hooks, and to refuse to carry pictures of dead fish on magazine covers. Trout Unlimited, in the United States, through the donations made by flyfishers, has played a key role in the conservation of wild trout and associated habitat, as have the Federation of Southern African Flyfishers in this country, and the Wild Trout Association and Grayling Society in the United Kingdom.

In view of the points raised above, Cambray's argument about the continued attraction of trout fishing for those dedicated to

conservation is not only ignorant, but insulting. Somehow, once again, Cambray constructs trout fishers as particularly stupid individuals:

So how has this myth of 'environmentally friendly' trout fishing been created in this country of ours which, ironically, is one of the more arid in the world? Is it in fact mostly an assault on the mind, spawned by all those advertisements for tobacco and alcohol that feature trout neatly laid out on the damp grass, with reel and artificial flies artistically arranged near the dead or dying fish?²²

Yes, Jim, and we all believe that one sip of a Mainstay cocktail will transport us instantly from downtown Bellville to a yacht off a Caribbean island! I suggest Cambray take a short walk from the Albany Museum to the Departments of Journalism or English at Rhodes University to learn a little more about the complex ways in which consumers engage with advertising.

His idyllic suggestion as to the paradigm shift we all need to make away from a focus on alien fish such as trout also bears further discussion. 'So the next time you are near a river,' he adjures, 'try looking at the freshwater systems from a different light. Not for what angling fish they have in them, but for what indigenous species are there.' 'Watch the dragonflies mating,' he encourages earnestly, 'the kingfishers catching small minnow species, listen to the soothing flow of the water.' This, he says, 'is the kind of experience which will keep freshwater systems intact'.²³ Three responses may suffice.

Firstly, Cambray's assumption seems to be that flyfishers do not take interest in, understand, or delight in the complexities of the riparian environments in which they fish. Even the briefest

reading of the substantial body of literature about trout fishing in South Africa (and beyond), or a conversation with just about anyone who carries a flyrod, will indicate the contrary.

Secondly, what Cambray describes is precisely the art of what is called 'reading the water', which involves careful and delicate observation and interpretation of all the signs of the ecosystem, as well as imagining what is happening subsurface. It is one of the most significant and satisfying things a flyfisher can learn.

And thirdly, the kind of pristine riverine environment that Cambray imagines is most likely to be found under the caretakership of fisherpeople, who understand the role indigenous vegetation, insect- and birdlife play in maintaining a healthy fish population. A walk along many other rivers reveals depressing knots of bugweed, lantana or black wattle crowding the banks, brambles scratching arms and legs, siltation from ploughing up to the banks or overgrazing, low water levels as a result of excessive extraction, and a flotilla of plastic bottles, packets and bits of polystyrene.

While not discounting the impact of exotic species, a recent report from the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry states that environmental factors other than the introduction of alien fish are more significant contributors to the degradation of riverine environments:

Of the nine listed principal factors that have the greatest unfavourable effect on the river system, the presence of alien fauna (including fish) is rated second lowest (at 8%). The greatest effects (the remaining 92%) are caused by development and other activities such as poor agriculture, urban sprawl, industrial and other pollution, and the construction of dams and weirs. Thus, while the

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presence of alien fish such as trout [does] indeed pose a threat to the indigenous aquatic biodiversity, they are neither the only nor the principal threat, despite assertions to the contrary.²⁴

I mentioned earlier that a healthy population of breeding trout is a good indicator of water quality. On his farm, Giant's Cup, Wolf Avni has established bio-monitoring stations on the Umzimkulwana River as it enters and leaves his property. He is totally committed to the maintenance of the ecosystems of the riverine environment, in all their complexity, and points out that Giant's Cup 'returns some of the highest scores on record – in a catchment that has been home to trout for more than a century. This is an aquatic system that is so pristine it is regarded as a benchmark against which upland streams and aquatic systems might measure their own health.'²⁵