

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wildness



*Hunting in the wilderness is of all pastimes the most attractive,
and it is doubly so when not carried on merely as a pastime.
Shooting over a private game preserve is of course in no way to
be compared to it.*

THEODORE ROOSEVELT¹

In October 1997, the magazine *Flyfishing* carried a story about Bill Hansford-Steele catching what was then the record rainbow trout in South Africa. It weighed in at a staggering 15 lb 2½ oz, and had been caught at Trout Hideaway in Mpumalanga, a fishing establishment that breeds and stocks enormous trout, and then provides supplementary feeding. The owner of Trout Hideaway, Adolf Nicklaus, had suggested previously that he expected the next South African record fish to come from his fishery.

The following issue of the magazine contained a stinging

attack on Hansford-Steele by Terry Andrews, who asked how many ‘pellet-fed monsters’ Steele needed to catch to bolster his ego.² Steele is a very good fisherman, a pioneering figure in the South African flyfishing tradition, and an author of some renown, so Andrews’ criticism was, I think, both excessive and gratuitous. But what was at issue is central to the practice and lore of trout fishing in South Africa and elsewhere: the notional ‘wildness’ of the quarry and its habitat. Another respondent, Kenny Biggs, argued that it was unsporting and duplicitous to claim as a catch of note a fish bred to enormous size in a hatchery, and then released into an environment in which it was artificially sustained until caught. This was equivalent to ‘canned fishing’, he claimed.³ Biggs’ position is supported by Nigel Dennis, in his straight-talking, no-nonsense *Getaway Guide to Fly-fishing in South Africa*, who specifically excludes from his discussion of catching trophy trout ‘hatchery fish fed to an enormous size on pellets and introduced to dams as “instant trophies” or fish whose ‘growth is enhanced by pellet feeding’,⁴ and Marcus Janssen, who states emphatically that a ‘ten-pounder only qualifies if it is wild or has lived most of its life as a wild and free fish’.⁵

Steele’s own account of catching the fish suggests that it required both persistence and skill, that he had seen the fish on three previous occasions, and that he was specifically targeting this specimen:

I chose a Monday – a sunny day with a stiff breeze – in order to be sure that a very quiet approach would not be spoilt by roaming anglers; it took some 30 minutes to get into place from behind the dam wall.

I cast along the edge of a 70-metre reed stand which ran along

and out from my right side. About 30 metres along was a small bay which had a gravel bottom. The water was crystal clear.

Double-haul casting about 5 metres past this bay, I retrieved extremely slowly – about 20 minutes for a full retrieve. The fish took the fly, a #10 Adolf, after the third cast. The take was very gentle and only on striking did I realise that it was a very large and powerful fish.⁶

But the fact remains that the South African record went to a fish that had lived for almost all of its life in a hatchery. The irony of this was reinforced by the fact that the previous issue of *Flyfishing* had carried a story of a 13 lb 3 oz fish that had been caught in a dam near Drakensberg Gardens by David Powter – a fish that grew to that size under ‘natural’ conditions.

Alongside the article on Steele’s fish was a piece by Mpumalanga flyfisher and commercial flyfishing operator, Jonathan Boulton. As well as attributing the size of the fish at Trout Hideaway to the relatively benign winter temperatures, which enable trout to convert protein more efficiently, he defended the fisheries management strategy of Trout Hideaway, especially the artificial feeding:

Of course, Adolf feeds the fish and – like the rest of us producing good-quality fishing with consistently large specimens under extreme rod pressures – he has to deal with the flak which goes along with it. The food chains in our freshwater systems are nowhere as complex and diverse as those in Europe and the United States, so the minute the ‘natural’ carrying capacity of the dam is exceeded by the demand for fish from increasing rods, supplementary feeding becomes a necessity, not a choice. So don’t snort in

snobbish disgust at the mention of Trout Hideaway. Yes, Adolf's fishing is 'artificial' but so is every other bit of fishing in the country, in varying degrees.⁷

It is tempting to rephrase Gertrude's famous line from *Hamlet*: 'The man protests too much, methinks.' Many anglers, myself included, would not agree that public expectation and rod pressure should mean that it is ethically acceptable to stock water beyond its carrying capacity, and then sustain the fish with supplementary feeding, nor that it is in the spirit of flyfishing to rear trout to enormous size in hatcheries for capture as 'trophies'. I am not suggesting that this should be outlawed; simply that it is not for me. Nor do I buy Boulton's argument that it is or should be the norm. Thankfully there are plenty of fisheries providing superb fishing without resorting to such measures.

Boulton's point about degrees of artificiality does have some merit, though the devil is in the degree. There are many ways to describe the quality of fish and fishing, and there are certainly flyfishers for whom the number and size of fish are all-important, rather than their origin or the quality of the environment in which they live. However, I would argue that the relative 'wildness' of the fish is probably the most important measure to most flyfishers.

A quick scan through the classified advertisements at the back of *The Complete Flyfisherman*, for example, reveals that many fisheries specifically emphasise the 'wild-spawned' or 'wild' nature of their fish, if they are able to (if they are unable to do this, the waters are described in contrast as 'well stocked'). There is a major commercial flyfishing operation called Wildfly, and the flyfishing association in the northeastern Cape markets its

self-sustaining river fish populations by calling itself the Wild Trout Association.

I said at the beginning of this book that part of being a flyfisher means having to modify one's behaviour on the water to encounter another species, and there is no doubt that fish that have never seen the inside of a hatchery spook more easily, are more selective, more difficult to catch, and fight harder. They have had to adapt to survive in their environment against adverse conditions, strong water flows, and a range of predators, including humans, so catching one is a great achievement. In physical terms, they tend to be more streamlined, have bigger, fuller fins (as well as generally having smaller fins, hatchery-bred fish often suffer fin damage), and a great deal more stamina. They also have an awareness of their aquatic environment, which enables them to distinguish artificial flies from naturals with greater ease, and to wrap delicate tippets around roots, rocks and other underwater obstacles with astonishing ease.

In the hierarchy of flyfishing for trout, fishing for wild-spawned river fish would probably top the list, with wild-spawned still-water trout a very close second (that is, trout that can migrate up the feeder streams of the stillwaters and so establish self-sustaining populations), followed by trout in stillwaters or rivers that are stocked at a small size, and so 'grow out naturally'. Near the bottom of the pile would be the 'put-and-take' fisheries in which fish are stocked (often daily or weekly) at a size ready for capture, but in which there is sufficient food for them to feed. At the very bottom would be those fisheries in which fish are stocked regularly and require artificial feeding, as the number of fish exceeds the carrying load of the water. Some fisheries in this category stock very large fish, which they market as trophy fish.

The esteem in which self-sustaining stream fish are held was well expressed by Nick Janse van Rensburg, a friend of my son, who described a fish he landed on the Witte River as '600 grams of pure wildness'.

In terms of this hierarchy, South Africa is blessed with many quality waters. Almost all the rivers in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, the northeastern Cape and some in the Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga fall into the first category. As regards stillwaters, there are some that have wild-spawned populations, but most fall into the third category, which is to most flyfishers more than acceptable. In his response to the account of Steele's record fish, referred to above, Kenny Biggs argued that no fish over 8 inches should be stocked.⁸ While I would broadly agree with the sentiment, populations of largemouth bass in some waters or the presence of substantial numbers of white-fronted cormorants may necessitate the stocking of trout in the 12-inch range.

Many of the fisheries that fall into the lower categories are in regions that are marginal for trout, or else in areas, such as sections of Mpumalanga, in which commercial interests appear to outweigh those of conservation (more of this in Chapter 9). While the United Kingdom has several beautiful rivers and lakes that hold breeding populations of trout, salmon and grayling, it has also seen the burgeoning of scores of put-and-take fisheries, in many of which double-figure fish are stocked either daily or weekly. The magazine *Trout Fisherman* covers these fisheries extensively. In such fisheries, catching an 'overwintered fish' – in other words, one that has been in the water for more than one season – is regarded as a major achievement, as I assume it connotes a degree of 'wildness'.



The bliss of a long weekend. Yesterday I took half a dozen fish from the Oak Tree Pools – lively silver fish of around a pound – all released to fight another day. The tiny Plewman's Killers I spent the previous afternoon tying were their undoing. Today I am fishing the Lourens with my son Mike. We fish turn and turn about, drifting small dry flies over tiny pockets of water, seldom more than knee deep. The water is icy, the footing treacherous, and the fish uncooperative. I raise and miss a fish, lying under a branch just dipping the water's surface. We rest it, and then Mike raises it too – a swirl easily missed in the ruffled current. Fifty metres on I drift my fly under an undercut bank. The response is instantaneous, and I hold in my hand a tiny, exquisitely jewelled rainbow.



I would like to look more closely at the terms 'wild', 'wildness' and 'wilderness'. Some of the terms of the debate were set by the 1964 Wilderness Act in the United States, which defined 'wilderness' as 'an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is himself a visitor who does not remain'. The Act further defines 'wilderness' as an area 'retaining its primeval character and influence ... which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions'.⁹

The very definitions in the Act embody a paradox or contradiction that haunts debates about conservation and biodiversity to this day, and has already been touched on in several chapters here: wildness/naturalness versus control/management. And lurking behind that, of course, is the hoary 'nature'/'culture' division. As pointed out in Chapter 5, those distinctions are only sustainable if the human is understood as non-biological and so

‘unnatural’, which is nonsensical, disabling and untenable.

More interesting, and convincing, I think, is to understand ‘wildness’ as an idea or quality, which may find its best expression in areas we define as wilderness, but is also expressed in a range of other contexts.¹⁰ This is a position that Jack Turner says Henry David Thoreau expressed so well when he talked of ‘wild nature, wild men, wild dreams, wild house cats, and wild literature’, which he associated with the ‘the good, the holy, the free ... [i]ndeed ... with life itself’.¹¹

In his book *The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder gives ‘wildness’ a specifically biological quality. He says that ‘wildness is not limited to the 2 per cent formal wilderness areas ... it is everywhere’. He points to ‘ineradicable populations of fungi, moss, mould, yeasts, and such that surround and inhabit us. Deer mice on the back porch, deer bounding across the freeway, pigeons in the park, spiders in the corners.’ ‘Wildness,’ he insists, may temporarily dwindle, ‘but wildness won’t go away.’¹²

That sense of relative qualities and manifestations enables us to understand the gradations of wildness articulated in relation to trout, even to complicate or problematise them. As well as tumbling through plunge pools in inaccessible kloofs, ‘wild’ streams such as the Mooi or the Umgeni flow through tranquil farmlands, with the fishing being as testy here as in the turbulent headwaters, and the fish as wily, if not more so at times. In the middle of a herd of grazing Holsteins lies a lake, apparently as domesticated as they come, which holds a head of trout that have grown from 250 grams to 3–5 kilograms on the rich diet of snails, damsels and dragonfly nymphs that the weedbeds support, and will snap like cotton anything less than a 2x tippet. Or even the humble stockie, which, despite until last week having grown

out on a diet of hatchery pellets flung by human hand, refuses with disdain your perfectly tied and presented dry fly – with a wariness that can only be deeply genetic.

Gary Snyder again captures this sense of wildness within areas of human work in the landscape in a formulation worth quoting at some length:

Every region has its wilderness. There is the fire in the kitchen, and there is the place less travelled. In most settled regions there used to be some combination of prime agricultural land, orchard and vine land, rough pasturage, woodlot, forest, and desert or mountain ‘waste’. The de facto wilderness was the extreme backcountry part of that. The parts less visited are ‘where the bears are’. The wilderness is within walking distance – it may be three days or it may be ten. It is at the far high rough end, or the deep forest and swamp end, of the territory where most of you all live and work. People will go there for mountain herbs, for the trapline, for solitude. They live between the poles of home and their own wild places.¹³

Lourensford Estate, which I fish most often and is about seven minutes’ drive from my suburban front door in Somerset West, as well as having vineyards, fruit orchards, timber plantations and a sawmill, has a dam with wild-breeding fish, several kilometres of self-sustaining trout stream, otters, fish eagles, antelope and several resident leopards. As wild as possible, and as natural as possible – within the limitations of an environment ineluctably influenced by humans – would probably summarise the desires of most of those who carry a flyrod.

It is a point well made by Arthur Carhart, writer and conservationist, who argues that there are in fact ‘several gradations

from the absolute wildness, toward the semi-urban picnic zone of our wildlands, that can deliver to many people approximately the full impact of the absolute wilderness'. This notion of wilderness does not exclude human changes to landscape, for these 'zones in wildland classifications may have in them old wagon roads, dilapidated sawmill structures, abandoned mines, even fresh Jeep tracks and still supply many people a true wilderness experience'.¹⁴

Despite stressing the absence of human influence in its definition, the United States Act does also acknowledge 'wilderness' areas in terms of their potential for human activity. A wilderness area is one that 'has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation'. While the equipment has become very technologically advanced, flyfishing still comes down, really, to angler, rod, line and fly: it is the essence of solitude and simplicity. In one of the earliest books on flyfishing in South Africa, *Trout Fishing for South African Boys* (1911), G.E. Pennington put this succinctly: 'a fully equipped fly fisher is not a human packhorse'.¹⁵