

A loss of trust

by Ian Cox

I received two requests this month to lend support to research affecting the trout value chain.

- The first was from one of the country's more innovative researchers on issues relating to tourism, especially tourism in rural communities. He and an EU based researcher were interested in researching the South African trout tourism industry's perception and response to climate change. The idea was to sort perceptions from reality with a view to developing adaptive strategies to cope with the gathering storm that is climate change.
- The second was a call from FOSAF chair Ilan Lax to support the economic survey of recreational angling that is being undertaken by Rhodes University with support from SAC CRA.

It seems both surveys have received remarkably little support from the fly fishing community.

The lack of support for the Rhodes economic survey did not surprise me. I had called for a boycott of that survey saying that the research methodology was fatally flawed and would result in the value of recreational trout fishing being substantially under measured. I feared that this would support DEA's claim that the value chain is not that valuable. I was suspicious of Saccra's involvement given its cosy relationship DEA and the deliberate harm that organisation has already done to the trout value chain.

My concerns regarding the quality of this research was later validated by experts one of whom said the project could be rescued provided the project valued the recreational fishing as a whole and did not disaggregate data to place a value on particular sectors such as trout or fly fishing. Those in charge of the project agreed which is why FOSAF lent the project its qualified support.

The second project was unaffected by this sort of baggage. Issues such as the alleged invasiveness of trout were immaterial to the investigation. However the questionnaire did ask the trout tourism industry to answer questions about their businesses and stocking regimes.

- There is a great deal of sensitivity around this, especially in Mpumalanga, where mid-level environmental provincial officials ignored undertakings given at a national level and prosecuted key operators in the trout value chain in that province for alleged failures to comply with provincial legislation. The request by those same officials to be registered as stakeholders in the research because of their concern that "the impact of this alien and invasive species through regular stockings on the indigenous fish species" muddied the waters to the point where the research was cancelled.
- As important as the research would have been, it is impossible to gather reliable data in such a hostile environment where officials wrongfully demonise trout as invasive and those engaged in the trout value chain have good reason to be suspicious of officials.

Though self-inflicted, the same is true of the economic survey and I have to say much of the research that is being commissioned around trout. A suspicious value chain is not going to be persuaded of

the merits of DEA's arguments when it is based on research that is of obviously poor quality that equally obviously is constructed to prove a point that is near and dear to the hearts of the officials who often fund that research. That value chain is going to become generally suspicious of the integrity and quality of research in general.

I believe this is what we are seeing in the trout value chain and in other business sectors who are obliged to engage with environmental authorities. The increasing intransigence of the game farming industry, which is enormously valuable both in economic and ecological terms, is an example of this as are the rising levels of concern that can be seen in government itself.

DEA claims to adopt a science based approach to its work. But this is not true where biodiversity is concerned. Its approach to biodiversity issues is tainted by distinctly unscientific, one might even say racist, assumptions of the pejorative nature of alienness. These belief driven constructs have polluted science and created divisions that have eroded the trust which good science needs in order to function.

This makes the mapping exercise that is presently underway all the more important. That exercise got off to a rocky start because scientists and environmental officials wanted to introduce their opinions regarding the invasiveness of trout into what should have been a fact based exercise aimed at mapping where trout occur. The trout value chain has eschewed an opinion based process pointing out, much to the amusement of scientists that their opinions count for nothing in law unless they speak to proven facts.

- It has taken a great deal of work to get the process back on track but back on track it seems to be, at least in most provinces. Reports coming in from around the country have shown that people with differing views are able to engage constructively when they deal with facts. My experience of the KZN mapping meeting was positive with most areas where trout occur being identified by consent.
- There are unfortunately exceptions to this. Officials in Mpumalanga and the Free State have been unable to make the time to meet with the trout value chain and DEA to undertake this exercise. The excuse may be genuine but officials in Mpumalanga have used this excuse too often in the past for it to have any credibility. The truth is that they do not want their prejudiced notions of alienness to be challenged by facts. Such is their desire to build walls, paid for preferably by those who harbour aliens that they have taken to describing hatchery bred specimens of indigenous fish as mutants. This old style thinking has no place in the modern South Africa which embraces the idea of a nation united in its diversity.
- So the fight is far from over. The fact that environmental officials have agreed the whereabouts of trout does not mean that they won't try to regulate them as dangerous aliens. Prejudice is a sturdy plant and environmental officials engaged in opposing trout embrace their prejudice with a zeal that is unmatched in government.
 - There world is one where one excoriates otherness and build physical and intellectual walls to shut it out. However I am optimistic. South Africans are

beginning to learn that they must fight for justice and that those who do not stand alone.

- So would be wrong to ignore the justifiable suspicion that exists in the trout value chain regarding the bona fides of officialdom and indeed science.

Thus while I wholeheartedly support the climate change research I also respect the trout tourism sector's reluctance to get involved. While I respect and support the stance FOSAF has taken on the economic survey I also have my suspicions. Will the promise that the research will not break down recreational fishing into sectors be kept. I cannot in all honesty give that assurance.

Loss of trust is a terrible thing.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing our environment is not the need to conserve biodiversity but rather the need to restore the trust that is in truth the foundation of every sustainable human endeavour.

That is going to require a sustained effort a bridge building. But the bridge needs to be built from both sides in circumstances where both sides believe that the other is doing nothing to build the bridge. Is completing the survey an exercise in bridge building or will it once again be used to put the trout value chain in a noose?

That dear reader is a decision you must make.
