

# Are trout anglers elitist?

By Ian Cox



My favourite trout fishing cartoonist is Thewell. His Complete Tangler pictured my early notions of fresh water fishing. So trout fishing for me was a world of two different types of trout angler. On the one hand you had the dry fly man who fished water as clear and gin but twice as expensive while on the other was the intrepid and much younger angler who spent a lot of his time soaked to the bone. I of course identified with the latter and do so to this day even though my body shape is closer to the former!



THE MOST EXCLUSIVE OF ALL ANGLERS IS THE DRY FLY MAN



HE LIKES TO STUDY THE RIVER FROM A BENTLEY



AND IS INTERESTED ONLY IN WATER AS CLEAR AS GIN

— AND TWICE AS EXPENSIVE

There is a natural tendency amongst fly anglers to identify the dry fly man as an elitist and the wet fly man as belonging to a lower order, elevated of course above the ranks of the coarse angler but a person of lesser stature nonetheless. This is brainless bigotry at its very best. There is no process of reason which justifies the dry fly man or indeed trout or fly anglers in general to claim superiority over their fellow anglers. Thankfully it is an affectation that is increasingly banished to the outer wastes of what today is a gloriously diverse and inclusive community of trout anglers.



HE PUTS A LORRY LOAD OF TROUT INTO HIS WATER, EVERY SPRING



AND EMPLOYS EXPERTS TO ENSURE  
THAT THEY NEVER GET OUT

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This does not of course mean that the label has not stuck or that trout anglers are not entirely unhappy that it has. After all the notion of trout fishing being somehow an upper class pursuit, baseless as it undoubtedly is, is good for business. So the label endures today because it's good for pushing up the prices of "trout" real estate even though it has about as much connection with the truth as the Marlborough Man.

HE SPENDS MANY HOURS STUDYING  
MINUTE AQUATIC FLIES ....



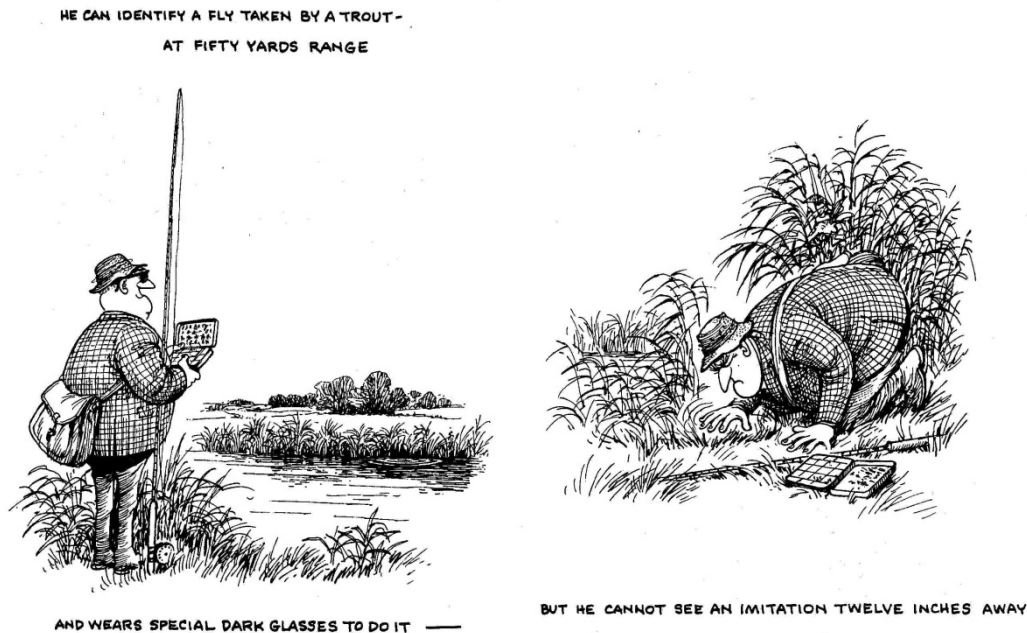
... WHICH HIS TROUT VERY RARELY EAT



AND TYING IMITATIONS -

WHICH LOOK NOTHING LIKE THE REAL ONES

But that is bullshit, not elitism. Elitism is something much more sinister. Elitism in the modern context is not really about wealth or class although elites are often wealthy and from what are known as the upper classes. Elitism is the belief that someone by virtue of his position, education or skill as a greater right to be heard than those who are not possessed with the elitist's gifts. It finds its home in the belief that people are not fit to govern and that government is best left to experts.



It speaks to values that are the antithesis of those that ground South Africa's Constitution.



I was reminded the other day when a senior official in the Department of Environmental Affairs said that trout fishing must be regulated because it was an elitist activity that did not really benefit South Africa. This is not only untrue, it is also a direct contradiction of the official line which is that trout fishing must be encouraged where trout already occur because it offers much in the way of benefits for South Africa.

It is also the essence of elitism.



THE WET FLY MAN IS A MORE ACTIVE CREATURE

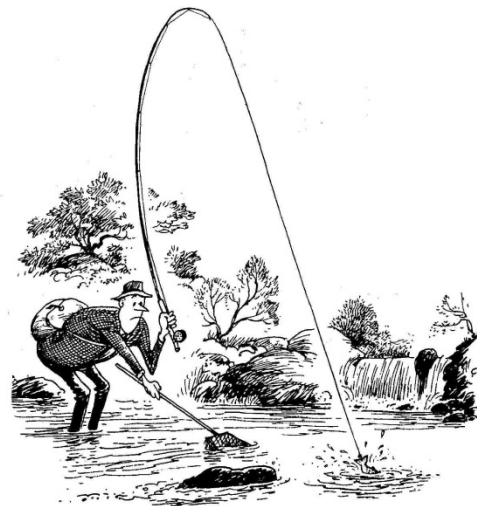


AND SPENDS A GOOD DEAL OF TIME IN THE WATER

You see if you are looking for the epitome of elitist behaviour you do not need to look further than the small and largely privileged community of conservationists who form and direct environmental policy in this country. The central tenet of their thinking is that environmental management must be science based and that the opinions of what is a very small community of likeminded scientists who advise them must prevail over the wishes of ordinary people.



HE IS LESS VAIN ABOUT HIS APPEARANCE



HE RARELY SEES HIS FISH UNTIL HE HAS HOOKED IT

There is a great deal wrong with this approach both at a moral and a legal level. South Africans do not like to be told what to do, especially by self-proclaimed experts. Being ordered about like sheep undermines what is a remarkably uniform or South African sense of human dignity. Deneys Reitz wrote in his book Outspan that the Afrikaner did not embark on the great trek to avoid British rule but rather to escape any sort of rule whatsoever! But it is not just the

Afrikaner that thinks this way. It is an instinct that binds all South Africans. This shared understanding of what is required to protect human dignity is the beating heart of our Constitution. Ignore it as government is increasingly doing and not only do you attract the ire of our courts but mayhem very quickly ensues. Just look around you if you think I am wrong.

And it is not just South Africa. Elites across the world are coming under attack as the people; the great unwashed as they were known to my grandmother's generation, make their discontent known.

This sort of thinking is doomed to fail. The trouble is the damage it is causing in the process of failing.

This brings me back to the tiny community that is South Africa's trout anglers. Believe it or not the majority of trout anglers are, spiritually at least, part of that great unwashed.

Yes it is true that trout fishing In South Africa is very largely an expensive pursuit that in large measure is only accessible to those who can afford the price of entry. There is a very good reason for this that has nothing to do with the elitism.

South Africa's trout fishing community is unique in that it is the only angling community in South Africa that invests in its fishery. And it is not just the fact that we stock trout into our fishing waters that makes this so. We also invest massively, in what Ilan Lax calls ecosystems services, in transforming what was suboptimal trout fishing property into a trout fisher's paradise. Wolf Avni's Goshen is a local example of this as is Andrew Fowler and the NFFC's work on bush clearing in the Umgeni catchment. Further afield one finds examples in trout fishing venues such as Highlands Run, Finsbury and Velorenkloof which are all massive rehabilitation projects made possible by trout.

While expensive resorts such as Walkersons, Highland Run or Velorenkloof are the "gin" side of trout fishing it is also true that you do not have to have millions in free cash around to access trout fishing.

Trout fishing is not a rich man's sport internationally. Indeed the beating heart of the trout fishing tradition in many countries is distinctly artisanal. This spirit also underpins the activity in this country.

Clubs like the NFFC, the Underberg Himeville Trout Club, the CPS, the Hartnesburg Trout Association and many others offer very reasonably priced access to trout waters. A great deal of trout fishing is also available to the general public at day ticket rates that are no more expensive than those charged for any other type of fishing. And then there is the hidden gem, at least in KZN, that are the kilometres of superb trout fishing that is to be had in our communal areas that are increasingly being opened up as the trout fishing community deracialises.

And so I come to the nub of the matter. Angling is as far from elitist as one can hope to get. It is hunting for the commons and as such has a huge role to play as a unifying force in society. When you go fishing you do not care what your companions do at work or how wealthy they are. It's their congeniality as fishing companions that counts and how you can enhance your fishing experience and you theirs. This is the golden thread that runs through the fishing experience across various fishing disciplines, across the world and through time.

The truth is that the glue that binds us as anglers is distinctly populous in character.

Trout fishing is very much part of that tradition and you can see it in the fact that trout anglers, sometimes from very modest backgrounds, embrace trout fishing and are embraced by what it is to be part of a community of trout fishers. This is no elitist club. It is an open community of anglers who derive enormous satisfaction from trout fishing being part of a community of trout fishing. The hundreds of books that are published every year about trout fishing bear testimony to trout anglers' populist desire to share their joy with others.

It is also a mistake, which many including myself sometimes make, namely to characterise trout fishing as a community of likeminded souls. This isn't the case. The community is in fact an enormously diverse one of different

people from different backgrounds and different values brought together by their shared love of the pursuit of trout. While the idea that trout fishing is posh is good for business I want to suggest that it is rather this diversity and the unifying force of this shared love that is what makes the trout fishing community socially and thus intrinsically valuable.

## *Brothers of the Angle*



FISHERMEN THINK OF THEMSELVES AS ONE BIG FAMILY —



AND TREAT EACH OTHER ACCORDINGLY



This is why I have so little time for the idea that dry fly fishing is a purer or higher form of fly fishing than other forms or the idea that trout fishers must conform to some code informed by private school notions of “the club”. Tell me that one can only fish in a certain way and my instinct is to do the opposite just to debag the humbug. The only rule, in my view, that applies to trout fishing and indeed any form of fishing is a mannerly consideration for your fellow angler, your environment and the landowner on whose land you fish. This translates into a number of “rules” which I

do not need to go into here. But I suggest that these rules mean nothing if they do not embrace the underlying value that angling unites us in our diversity.

Care for the environment is also not some perverted conservationist's creed that sees human beings as a plague to be controlled by the "enlightened" few in according to their opinion of the greater good. That is after all the height of elitism which as I hope I have pointed out is inimical to the core values that underlie angling as hunting for the common man.

If you seek to control fish or human beings as a plague then you do not understand angling or democracy or human rights for that matter. You also do not realise that we are part of the natural order (or is it chaos) of this planet or that the environment is not a place where we do not exist but rather the sum of what is necessary to sustain our health and wellbeing as a species.

I think trout fishing has a roll to play in this and though there is room for improvement I think that it is playing that role quite well.

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