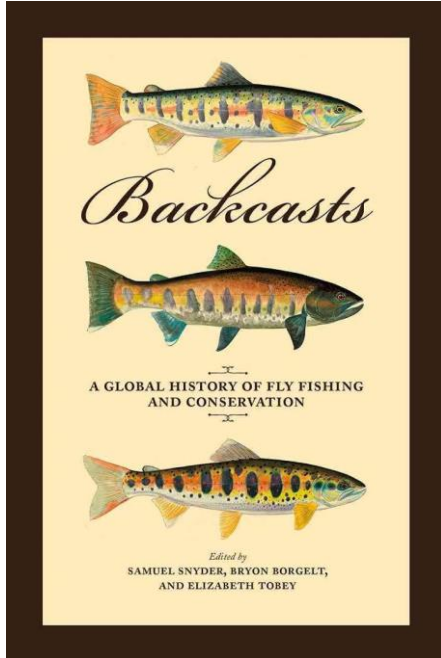


Backcasts

A global history of fly fishing and conservation

by Ian Cox



Backcasts belongs to that genre of books which collect together presentations given at an academic conference. However in this case the conference did not happen but the book deal seems to have survived.

I got it from my wife for my birthday but at my request so I will not be hurting her feelings when I say I was a little disappointed. It's a pricey book, 45USD or 38 quid all told if you bought it, as she did, in the UK.

My disappointment is not only a question of price. I have suffered the high paywalls that academics build around work often funded by the taxpayer long enough to manage that irritation. No, my grumpiness in this case stems

from the grandiose claim that this was "A global history of fly fishing and conservation".

Let me tell you it isn't. In fact it is not even close to being a global history, even if such a thing is possible. It is a highly personalised account of a number of contributor's perspectives on trout and perceptions around conservation in a small sample of the world's trout waters. In the USA in particular, whose stories dominate it is a perception strongly biased in favour of perspective of the invasion ecology movement within the US based Trout Unlimited organisation.

Please don't take this as an attack on the work being done by Trout Unlimited or the perspectives of the various authors. It isn't. Indeed those views are interesting to someone like me who has made a bit of a study of the issues touched upon in this book. It's the claim that the views in this book are somehow authoritative or global or indeed that they constitute a history that gets my goat.

Speaking on positives, I found the general incoherence of the overall narrative highly educational. The main question one is left with after reading the book, is what the hell is conservation? That, as it turns out, is a very good question.

You see conservation is a very broad church that can cover the whole gamut from back to nature deep ecology of the kind that was eulogised in the movie Noah all the way through to sustainable use. Thus the book contains chapters extolling nativist ideas coming out of the USA and South Africa about the

inherent superiority of indigenous species all the way through to sustainable development principles based on the need to protect and even restore fish friendly habitats.

It was interesting to read for example that fisheries based conservation in Iceland does not care that a lot of the fishery is stocked to the alien rainbow trout. It is the destruction wrought by hydroelectric and wood burning power generation that concerns Iceland's fish conservationists. Yes green energy is not always as green or as sustainable as one might think!

Mansori Horiuchi's superb article "A history of angling and fisheries management and conservation in Japan" provides a perspective South African trout anglers will be familiar with. I say superb not only because of the way it resonates with the South African experience but also because it was the only article which truly sought to grapple with the clash of cultures that is so problematic in trout fishing and fisheries conservation management especially insofar one has to deal with invasion ecology based beliefs.

Japanese trout fishers are working to try and create what they elegantly term "comfortable and sustainable trout fishing" in a country where recreational fishing is foreign, where the resource is being depleted by the destruction of riverine habitats and is in any event too small to meet demand. Pejorative ideas around non-native fish which in Japan is any fish introduced after 1868 (this includes rainbow trout) have recently added to the complexity of the situation and thus the challenge in trying to protect aquatic habitats in general.

Just as in the case in South Africa this new eco nationalism being pursued by environmental and fisheries departments is at variance with the earlier practice of those departments actively promoting and encouraging the introduction of fisheries species such as rainbow trout. The result was the kind of bureaucratic boondoggle we are now experiencing in this country. The result is that fishing, as a recreational activity is in decline in Japan, especially outside those areas which are stocked to rainbow trout.

And then we have the South African contributions. Yes contributions. Unique for countries outside the USA, there were two South African contributions to this compilation. One is from Mr Rotenone himself that is Dean Impson of Cape Nature and the other from UKZN's Malcom Draper.

I read Dean Impson's contribution with particular care as he is a card carrying member of the South African invasion ecology movement and part of the official structures in the Western Cape responsible for controlling (read eradicating) trout.

His message was a contradictory one. First he says that trout are invasive in South Africa because of what "he terms their ability to establish breeding and expanding populations in several mountain streams as well as having a negative

ecological impact on native aquatic communities". Secondly he recognises the considerable social and economic benefits that flow from the presence of trout in South Africa. But he does not really deal with the consequences of these two realities other than what he terms the powerful trout lobby who will continue to ensure trout's survival.

If you ignore the more blatant factual inaccuracies' and go for the meat of the article you will find two key messages emerge from Dean's article.

- The first is that despite their protestations to the contrary, South Africa's environmental authorities will get rid of trout if they think they can get away with it.
- The second is that South African environmental authorities have absolutely no idea how the environmental right operates as a human right in South African law. One example of this is the fact Dean's definition of invasive which is in line with the official view in irreconcilable with the legal definition. There are many more as the increasing number of adverse court rulings is beginning to show.

This inability of environmental authorities to transform and the consequent misalignment between what they are trying to do and the Constitution, its values and the rule of law represents constitutes catastrophic weakness, a cancer if you like, that threatens not only conservation however you chose to characterise it, but also sustainable use and indeed the preservation of human rights and dignity itself.

I only hope trout will not be a victim of either the disease or the cure.

This brings me finally to Malcom Draper's contribution. I must confess I am a fan of Malcom Draper. I thought his 2003 paper "[Going native? Trout and settling identity in a rainbow nation](#)" was excellent. This provided the foundational thinking behind much of what Duncan Brown had to say in "Are trout South African?"

I was consequently a little disappointed by this latest offering.

I think the idea of trying to write about the "holy trout" against the backdrop of the South African and New Zealand experience is overly ambitious. I also think the links he tries to make around the development of trout acclimatisation societies in South Africa seem to me to be strained as do attempts to compare these efforts with the New Zealand experience.

As he says the idea of settler trout in the English colonial sense does not really apply to South Africa. The truth is that the support for the introduction of trout into South Africa was remarkably multicultural despite eco nationalists trying to characterise trout as a "donnerse engelse vis".

Furthermore it was not trout fishing as a religion per se or even a colonial pursuit that brought trout to South Africa but rather the business of trying to promote tourism and outdoor recreation as a healthy pastime albeit officially only for white South Africans.

Far too little work has been done in this country, in my opinion, to critically analyse the influence that the growth of leisure and the development of trout economies around recreational fishing the south of England and the eastern United States in the late 19th century had on the development of trout fisheries in this country. I think you will find that South Africans persevered in trying to introduce trout and invested in spreading trout because it made good business sense to do so.

There is also the fact many of South Africa's rivers did not have fish that were suitable for angling or in many cases any fish at all. I think there is far too much emphasis placed on colonial anglers preferring fish from home rather than the above more prosaic reality.

That is not to say that trout fishing does not speak to the soul. I think it clearly does hence its appeal. That said I don't think any of the contributors really got it though some tried. I recommend Tom McGuane's outstanding [address](#) to the Museum of the Rockies in May of this year for those who want to get a sense of what trout fishing can mean.
