

A weekend at the Kosi Lakes

By Ian Cox



I have just returned from two day of fishing on the lakes at Kosi.

For those readers who may not know Kosi is the system of four lakes situated on the coast just south of the Mozambique border. The lakes, which start with the estuary at Kosi mouth (first lake) become increasingly less saline through second and third to fourth lake which is an entirely freshwater system.

The entire system forms part of the greater St Lucia Wetland Park and is a proclaimed world heritage site. It is managed nominally by the park authority Isimangiliso but the actual on the ground day to day management has been contracted to the provincial parks authority, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.

The Kosi lakes and their surrounds are an extremely important ecosystem. The lake itself operates as a nursery for a wide range of marine fish species found on the east coast. Its ability to function as such plays a key role in preserving the health of the east coast marine fishery itself.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the Kosi lakes are also a famous for the quality of the recreational fishing that is to be had there. In fact Kosi and the coastline around it is the go to place if you want to target king fish (giant trevally).

The scary part of this story is that the fishing was very poor indeed and has been very poor for quite some time. It was not just us. Other anglers, some who had been staying at Kosi for weeks and who had fished Kosi annually for as much as 30 years or more also complained how bad the fishing was.

We for our part accounted for about 6 fish in 2 solid days fishing. None was over 20 cm in length. All but one was caught in the channel between second and third lakes. They all fell to a small green mylar sprat. This was despite a wide variety of much larger “kingy” type flies being presented.

The view of every recreational angler I spoke to was that the fishing was bad because the lakes were being overexploited. Anglers complained that while the fish traps, which are a famous feature of the lakes had proliferated, were getting out of hand, the real problem was the extensive use of gillnets all over the lake system. The problem seems to be that the fishing tradition is no longer subsistence based but is now commercially driven. Anglers complain that this illicit trade which is being carried out under the guise of a cultural tradition is driving the Kosi lakes fishery to the point of extinction.

I did not get to talk to any of the locals operating the fish traps and presumably the gill nets so cannot speak first hand to what their experiences were. I can say from our encounters with them on the water that they are not happy. We were often greeted (shouted at would be a more apt description) with obvious hostility. The Zulu speakers on our boat said that the general complaint was that we were fishing their lakes and that they were being exploited and that we were part of that exploitation.

Blame the other guy is a very natural response when the well begins to run dry. It seems to me that both recreational and traditional fishermen are doing just that. This clash between recreational and traditional fishermen is nothing new. In fact it goes back over a century. Indeed much of the body of laws that purports to conserve our fisheries is really about protecting recreational angling from traditional fishing. You could even say that the South African term for a traditional fisherman is poacher.

I do not think it augers well for the future the South African fishery. Blaming the other guy in my opinion creates pointless grounds of contestation that make the underlying problem of maintaining a viable and sustainable fishery a great deal worse. I am much more interested in finding ways to break this cycle of abuse as part of a search for shared practical solutions that contribute to restoring a viable fishery that can be enjoyed sustainably by all South Africans.