

# Uncovering the Umgeni

By Ian Cox



A good sign of a healthy organisation is its ability to regenerate and build better things on the foundations of its previous successes. The Natal Fly Fishers Club is a very health organisation by that measure.

A new team is running the NFFC and if early signs are anything to go by, they are going to do the old team the NFFC membership proud. In fact if you are not already a member I would join and do so quickly before membership becomes a matter of taking ones place on a waiting list.

New teams mean new perspectives and initiatives. The NFFC chairman tells me that the NFFC will be concentrating more on rivers than it did in the past. There are sound practical reasons for this. It looks like the four decade love affair that KZN trout anglers have had with still water fishing is beginning to wane. There are many reasons for this but a big one is the degradation of still waters as a result of climate change, pollution and increased water abstraction. Another is that the recent explosion in light tackle technology and fishing techniques have made river fishing a much more exiting affair than it was when we pursued tiddlers with 6 weights. A third is that more and more good river fishing is becoming available.

The last of these bears special attention. River health in South Africa is declining so much so that the quality of water in some areas has got so bad that it cannot even be safely used for irrigation. This has resulted in an increased focus in recent years in trying to redress this trend. Common sense dictates that these activities focus on the catchments first. These catchments just happen to be the places where trout thrive.

Dr Preston from DEA's working for water program insists that trout should be declared invasive because they are alien to these catchments and thus, he believes, destructive of the natural (as in nonhuman) order that he says underpins river health. The truth however is proving very different. It turns out that nature is not a racist and that human beings and our impacts are not all bad.



It turns out that the introduction of trout has been good for KZN's rivers. The sought of environment that sustains trout and the value that come with the presence of trout have encouraged responsible environmental stewardship in these areas. This has resulted in win wins where the general trend of environmental degradation has been reversed because trout fishing has improved. Those whose belief systems put nature on a pedestal and class humans as alien interlopers hate to acknowledge this, but human impacts can be beneficial sustaining earth systems that underpin our health and wellbeing.

The work that NFFC has done and is doing in the Umgeni catchment is a good example of this. Paradoxically a lot of this work has been done in co-operation with Dr Preston's WfW programme. The result has been a significant improvement in recent years in the health of the upper Umgeni catchment and consequently in the trout fishing in the area.

I was privileged to be part of a weekend showcasing this revitalised fishing venue that was arranged by the NFFC. I was originally going to fish on the Sunday with Andrew Savs but my wife who is ever supportive of my fishing said of course you can go but we will be celebrating your son's birthday. So I went on the Saturday instead and what an experience that turned out to be.

I was paired with Chris Ebersohn who lives in Howick and regularly fishes the Umgeni. We were placed on the Knowhere beat which was where we were told the fish are. [\(Click here for his article on fishing Knowhere that was published in the Creel in February this year\)](#) And the fish were there and bloody big fish to. I hooked into a monster which had I landed may well have been the biggest fish I have ever caught on a river. Anton Smith who fished the same beat an hour or two later hooked into and lost a fish that he said made him go weak at the knees.

I was fishing a 3 weight rod and a 5x tippet which on reflection was probably on the light side. I would have preferred to be fishing a 5 weight if truth be told. This is most definitely not the place of a Sage 000 or a light bamboo rod.

But the fishing was tough. The water was clear and on the thin side. I would class myself as the novice amongst anglers fishing the river that day and no one managed to catch anything. Sunday proved much more successful. Lew \_\_\_\_\_ who fished the same beat on the Sunday had an excellent days fishing. Such are the vagaries of fishing!

The Umgeni is a famous brown trout river. It was eulogised around the globe as great fly fishing water over a century ago. People used to come from all over the world to fish it. I could never work out why until Saturday.

The Umgeni is once again showing signs of being a great river. What is more it is accessible being an hour's drive from Kloof. It also has a good eatery in the form of Il Postino nearby that sells craft beer. So if you cannot find solace on the river there are alternatives.

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