

Where have all the fish gone?

By Dr Steven Brooks



I have seen, over the past two years or more, many references to the Alien and Invasive Species Regulations from the fly fishing clubs in KZN and from FOSAF, basically saying that this is the greatest threat to our enjoyment of the glorious sport of angling. I understand why this is being said but I have to tell you that it is not true. Certainly there is a threat to trout fishing, but there is a greater threat and that is to have almost no fishing at all.

I grew up in the North of England in the nineteen fifties and sixties and I started fishing at the age of five with jam jars in a small stream; I have fished ever since. I don't play bowls and I don't play golf. If the weather is bad or I am not feeling up to a day on the water, I stay at home and read books about fishing, or lately I might watch videos about fishing or tie some flies. I also spend time tying knots. Since I joined Durban Fly Tyers, I have had fun tying flies and drinking red wine and swapping stories with other fly tyers, but there has always been the same point to it and that is that there will be always fishing trips to come.

Without the next fishing trip there is actually not much point to any of it. Can you imagine a world where there is no fishing, at least not in rivers and not in many dams? I was in Dullstroom recently for my annual week on the Highveld. This time we stayed at Millstream, a lovely estate, which has a good mix of still water and river fishing. Rivers have always been, for me, the most interesting freshwater haunt so I spent time on the river running through the resort. While I caught a lot of fish, it was sad to see the bright green stringy, slimy weed that that is a tell-tale sign of pollution, covering so much of the bottom of the river. A few enquiries revealed the extent of the problem; sewage running through the streets of Lydenberg, now known as Mashishing, and into the river system. Sewage spillages into the river in Dullstroom. Closer to home the rivers are under threat; the Palmiet, the Msindusi. This concentrates abstraction of the cleaner rivers. If this continues, the freshwater systems feeding rivers and dams will die and the fishing with them. Have you any idea what it is like to live in an area cursed in this way? Let me take you there, to the rivers of my youth in Manchester. The Goyt, the Etherow, the Thame, the Mersey; all were grossly polluted and held no fish, no living creatures of note; just a bad stink. I belonged to a club called Hyde Albion, named after the pub where we held meetings and another club called Denton Sports. We had some famous anglers as members and we took the opportunity to learn from them. We fished for everything that

swam in the waters we visited; the River Severn at Atcham Bridge and its tributary, the Vrnwy, the Trent at Farndon and Hazelford Ferry; Dunsforth on the Yorkshire Ouse, the Yorkshire Derwent, the Witham in Lincolnshire, the River Tweed at Coldstream. These rivers were all three or four hours and sometimes more from home. The stretches we could fish were small and so they were "pegged down" so that each angler had a ten yard gap in which to fish to the next angler. You could fish any method and all fish counted at the weigh-in; the top weights won money which covered the coach fare and a bit more. There was no possibility to nip down to the local river for a couple of hours because they were all polluted. As a young man brought up on match fishing, I fished competitions in a number of Western European countries and in the UK National Federation of Anglers Team Championships a number of times. It was exciting and rewarding and I have a number of NFA championship medals to show for it, but took so much time from wife and family I gave up match fishing in favour of what we called pleasure fishing and that description is very apt.

Somewhere near to where your soul resides is a special place for angling memories; it is a Pandora's Box of good and bad and you never know what will come out if you choose to open it. One example from that box is my memories of the river Ribble in Lancashire. The Ribble flows into the sea near Preston. Because it flows from the rural North on the border between Lancashire and Yorkshire, it had few of the pollution problems that the South Lancashire, Derbyshire and Cheshire rivers suffered due to their South Lancashire, North Derbyshire and East Cheshire sources all flowing Westwards towards Manchester, joining the River Mersey and so to the sea. The Ribble had trout, salmon and all kinds of course fish like grayling, chub, dace, perch and roach. The day I passed my driving test, the world of the Ribble opened up so long as my dad would let me borrow the car. The river is shallow where we fished it above Ribchester, but it was full of fish. It was so precious to me that it is hard to control the emotions that spring up from a dip into Pandora's Box.

So how precious is your fishing to you? I have competing attractions now for my time, like two grandchildren, so I don't go as often as I used to, but for those who do, I will tell you how things in the UK were changed for the better. There is a society, created after the Second World War, that fights pollution issues on behalf of anglers in the UK. Called, originally, the Anglers Cooperative Association, or ACA, it became the Anglers Conservation Association in 1994 and also has a legal arm known as Fish Legal. They have won many famous cases against the UK government, the local authorities, the regional water boards and major industrial companies, builders and farmers and won huge amounts in damages on numerous occasions, most of them settled out of court, often on the court steps. They developed legal expertise in fighting cases of pollution, water abstraction, commercial overfishing, litter, habitat degradation, poaching, fish barriers created by hydro-power schemes, drainage of wetlands, excess water temperatures (power stations), excess cold water (deep dam water storage schemes) and botched flood control schemes. Current cases involve such liquid Holy Grail as the River Test, the River Itchen, the River Ribble, the River Lune, the River Wye and the extinction of the Arctic Char in a Welsh high mountain glacial lake. I was a member until after I left the UK.

Is there any equivalent in South Africa? Certainly FOSAF currently falls a long way short of what the ACA achieves and the begging notices that go out for financial support for the team fighting for trout should not be necessary and tell a tale. The vastly experienced team at Fish Legal represent a formidable challenge to any threat to fish and fisheries and they have, through subscription and bequests, the funds to do it. We in SA don't have that, at least not yet, and we don't seem even to know that we need or want it. The UK is no better than South Africa when it comes to destroying resources; the difference is that the knowledge that the ACA will go as high as the House of Lords to get justice is a strong deterrent.

It would not surprise me to hear people say it's too late here; I hope not.