

## Why trout?

By Ian Cox



[Gordon Van der Spuy on the Crocodile River at Verlorenkloof](#)

Why trout? Why is the Department of Environmental Affairs trying to get rid of trout? These are the questions that come up every time Trout SA or FOSAF talk about this issue. And the answer that is invariably given is that trout have become the victims of the zealots who occupy high office in the department.

Though environmentalism is a movement that boasts more than its fair share of zealots and while it is true that these hold sway at the DEA I don't think that one can say that this is the only reason why trout are being targeted. Though environmental zealotry is scary stuff, the most extreme espousing causes that are far to genocidal for comfort, even the they will tell you that trout rank pretty low on their list of environmental offenders.

If zealots are the problem then why are we not been told to get rid of gum trees or pine plantations or dairy cows for that matter? The environmental harm threatened by these species especially to the quality of South Africa's scarce water resources makes any real or imagined threat posed by trout pale into insignificance.

I think there is a much simpler reason that does not require one to delve into the inner workings of the departmental mind. I think the DEA's determination to eradicate trout lies more in the fact unlike other invasive species they can in fact get rid of trout.

You see for a supposedly invasive species, trout are in fact incredibly vulnerable. They are hopelessly intolerant to pollution so much so that trout are threatened by most modern forms of agriculture. The ideal trout waters are found in high lying pristine mountain catchments feeding clean cool fast flowing rivers. You will find very little of that in South Africa which is why so much of South Africa's trout waters survive because of constant husbandry through stocking and careful water and land management.

You would think that this would make trout an example of how an alien species can be used to benefit the environment. The total land area that is maintained in pristine or near pristine condition in order to sustain trout fishing runs into tens of thousands of hectares. But this is not so. The huge contribution that trout have made to the so called green economy is ignored by government officials. Landowners who have spent millions of rands in rehabilitating their land with a view to protecting and enhancing their trout waters are seen as profiteers and are threatened with financial ruin rather than the praise and encouragement one would expect of people making a positive contribution to the protection of biodiversity.

Various conservation agencies in the employ of the state have targeted trout with ever increasing ferocity. This campaign has seriously impeded the growth of South Africa's aquaculture industry so much so that we are now being outclassed by countries like Lesotho and Nepal. The quality of a country's aquaculture industry is increasingly being seen as critical to its food security.

But the DEA does not care about the damage they do to the health and wellbeing of South Africa's people. This is a sacrifice they are prepared to make and think South Africans must be forced to make. You see they have a much more pressing concern. Despite all the brouhaha they can't actually rid South Africa of invasive species. They concede that this is impossible both in this country and anywhere else. The boast by one state employed scientist that they will restore South Africa's rivers to their pre-colonial state is bollocks. Pure propaganda disseminated in the cynical belief that it will play well to the anti-colonial fervour of the ruling party.

Trout are being earmarked for eradication because unlike other species they can be eradicated. That should tell you that trout are not in fact invasive. But state environmentalists desperately need an environmental success story so they can claim that the billions they spend annually are more than just a poverty alleviation scheme. Successful as the working for water and other such schemes have been in employing tens of thousands who would not otherwise be employed and in clearing thousands of hectares of alien plants, none of this has actually resulted in the eradication of a single invasive species or done much more than temporarily halt their spread.

Like the paint on the Firth of Forth Bridge, it all has to be done again and again. What is more despite the billions officials controversially claim to have saved the economy, the state of our rivers are in fact significantly worse than they were 20 years ago. And this is not going to get any better.

Increasing populations and declining acreage available to commercial agriculture, not to mention a very finite water supply and a rapidly increasing population requires the increasing industrialisation

of agriculture, the construction of more dams and inter basin water transfer schemes. The new Springovle dam is a recent example of a water transfer scheme aimed at ensuring that the water scarce EThekweni Pietermaritzburg region does not run out of water. This is becoming critical as pollution makes dams such as Inanda increasing less viable as a source of potable water. The recently announced dams to be built on the ecologically sensitive Umzimvubu river is another example of the practical need for water trumping environmental concerns. And the rapid increase in short lease coal mining in the upper catchment of the apparently environmentally fragile Crocodile River in Mpumalanga is an example how the need to enrich the politically connected trumps every consideration of human decency.

All of the above is having a significantly greater impact on biodiversity than alien fish species have ever had. In fact this impact ranks very low in the general scheme of things. Alien fish species are ranked eight out of a list of nine potentially adverse impacts to aquatic biodiversity.

Trout are not in fact invasive certainly not insofar as that term is defined legally and not even if you use the anthropophobic scientific sense of that word. Trout have spread as far as they are likely to go. And they did so decades ago. Any further spread requires human intervention and will be minimal given the scarcity of viable habitats.

Species that are allegedly threatened by trout have in fact coexisted with trout for many years. That is why scientists are now propagating the myth that *predation generally results in local extirpation of native fishes and therefore individual level sub-lethal impacts are difficult to document due to lack of cooccurrence between native and non-natives*. (As per Ellender Wyl et al) Any trout fisherman will tell you that this is just bollocks but constant repetition has made it an accepted fact in environmental thinking. But then again the self-same thinking says that the billions of rand investment that is the trout hospitality industry in Mpumalanga does not exist because it has not been written about in an academic peer review journal!

And so it is we have the concept of the sacrificial scape fish trout. Coined by Duncan Brown in his book "Are Trout South African" the phrase describes the ritual sacrifice of a species to create the impression that something is being done when the opposite is true.

Think I am wrong? Well then ask how it is that the majority of bass and carp fisheries in South Africa are left untouched while the converse is true in the case of trout? Ask how it is that trout have been earmarked for destruction even though scientists candidly admit that the scientific case for their eradication is based on research that is decidedly dodgy. And why is it that trout are always highlighted as the alien fish causing the biggest threat when the literature invariably hands this accolade to bass.

And none of that research (if you can call it that) looks beyond the simple assumption that indigenous is better than alien to take other impacts into account such as the economic, social or cultural benefits that are associated with an alien species. There is also no attempt to rank impacts in terms of any objectively quantifiable norms and standards. There isn't even a government policy on the protection of aquatic biodiversity.

This lack of policy or objectively measurable standards makes it so much easier to target trout. And yes it is true that the belief systems of departmental officials are driven on prejudice and ideas of

racial purity but I don't think this is what is driving the attack on trout. They see trout as a soft target. It's the age old primal need to survive. They need to claim a victory and they see trout as the ideal candidate for that victory.

It is our job to teach them that they are wrong, to show these bully's that they have chosen the wrong victim and if we can't make them stop at least encourage them to look for easier pickings elsewhere.

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