



Chapter 15

Teedle-Deedle-Dee!

BY THE MIDDLE PART OF the twentieth century in South Africa, trout (introduced in latter part of the nineteenth century) had achieved a high degree of admiration, associated with a lot of romance and, in some circles, rather snobbish status. This is in sharp contrast to the situation today, where the trout is (in some circles), denigrated as an ‘alien’ whose extirpation is called for as a result of its purportedly constituting a threat to the future of certain indigenous fish and amphibians. There seems little doubt that there are occasions where the trout has become a threat to some of our smaller species, but there is scant evidence to suggest that they constitute a *force majeure* among threats to our biodiversity.

A convincing example of this favourable status is that in 1974, trout management was still an important feature of river conservation in the Natal Parks Board. With Board approval I organised, as a newly-appointed scientist charged with improving trout fishing and looking after the sea

turtle programme, an endeavour aimed at creating deep pools in some of the shallow stretches on the nGwangwana River within the Coleford Nature Reserve. The aim was to provide more holding water for trout during the dry winter months.

An enthusiastic associate, Tony Goetsche, from African Explosives, laid on copious quantities of dynamite and early one morning the two of us planted dozens of charges, tucked into convenient cracks in the rocks, in several shallow areas in the river. When we pressed the plunger for the first time the results were spectacular, as waterspouts flew a good fifty metres into the air. While gazing in admiration at this amazing result it was forcefully brought to our notice that we had under-estimated the force of the charge and we found that we were well within range of a cascade of falling rock fragments. We had some nervous moments as rocks, certainly large enough to have terminated one's interest in trout, or anything else, fell around us. All further discharges saw us, sensibly, well out of range of the resultant rock debris.



A little more holding water created

After each explosion we dashed back into the river armed with nets, anticipating, also quite sensibly, that the dynamite would have rendered many trout hors de combat, and, if all else failed, we would have a free late breakfast of trout. Imagine our surprise when, at the end of the final discharge, we found we had killed only one trout of miniscule size but had killed scores of the small indigenous fish – the Stompneusghieliemientjie or, more scientifically, *Barbus anoplus*.

This common little minnow rarely, if ever, attains a length of eight centimetres and it is the ‘threat’ to these fishes and their family in other parts of South Africa, for which trout are currently being persecuted. As trout and Stompneusghieliemientjies have shared this river for more than one hundred years it seems admirable to me, based on the proportional kills, that the tiny indigenous fish had clearly established modes of survival involving suitable adaptation to avoid over-exploitation by the predatory trout.

All too often we humans underestimate the ability of species to adapt when faced with new threats. In this case there is no doubt that the trout pose no threat to the *Barbus* in the Drakensberg streams. However, I cannot speak with confidence about the possibility of threats to fish in other areas, such as those in the Cape mountain streams, where intervention may be necessary to prevent the extinction of local indigenous species. I believe that, should such necessities exist, it is far better to deal with the problem at the local level, rather than endeavour to implement a scorched earth policy to eliminate the trout throughout the country.

This current policy of planning the extirpation of trout seems rather misplaced as there is no better indicator of the good health of a river than the presence of an active and vigorous population of trout. In conclusion, in my personal view, it is a pity that our Department of Environment Affairs has not accepted the presence of this splendid fish in the same spirit displayed by the New Zealanders. They love them ... as do I.

When I arrived at Giant’s Castle not only was there a great brown trout river flowing within metres of my new home, but I was also thrilled to find that Bill Barnes was an avid angler and a past manager of one of the Natal Parks Board’s three trout hatcheries, in his case the Royal Natal National Park hatchery. Apart from being extremely knowledgeable about the species as a whole he proved a talented and enthusiastic fishing companion.

Thanks to popular Victorian literature, old photographs and excellent

Drakensberg Ranger

cartoonists like Thelwell, there have been, for a long time, ubiquitous images of the trout angler clad in tweed, proud of mien, sporting a deerstalker, legs hidden in thigh length waders, a wicker creel carelessly slung over the back and always accompanied by a superior air. Most anglers were depicted as privileged aficionados, drawn from the upper classes, with skills and equipment available only to them. Their very presence and value as trout anglers were measured by the cost and rarity of their attire and gear.



The poverty-stricken ranger/fisherman (note inner tube creel)

Then there were others who, for numerous reasons, could neither afford the expensive tackle nor had a burning desire to make life uncomfortable for themselves in the South African climate by wearing tweed. Few of us in the local underclass could afford waders and none of us wicker creels. Bill, I was delighted to find, was a kindred spirit and fitted into our under-class of trout anglers. What is often forgotten these days is that to Bill, and his father before him, trout represented a necessary source of protein. As it did to all the early Drakensberg rangers, and indeed the early settlers like

Peter Root (Officer-in-Charge of Loteni Nature Reserve) and his family in the Loteni Valley. There was place neither for snobbery nor vanity; they caught for food. One might say that they were a disgrace to the popular image of the trout angler ... but could they catch trout!

In the 1950s and early 1960s, for poverty-stricken rangers (like me) and their friends, the options for rods were quite narrow. Split cane rods were the most desirable fly rods – especially those from the great angling houses of the UK, such as Hardy Brothers, Sharps of Aberdeen and Ogden-Smith of London. But these rods were prohibitively expensive. Japanese-made split cane rods were also available and, being very cheap, dire tools they were, because if the bottom of the stream was hooked, a good hard pull resulted in the rod assuming a permanent bow (very common amongst Japanese). One could rectify this temporarily by stripping the rod of all its eyes and retying them on the opposite side of the bend, but this was a tiresome and very impermanent solution. And then, at last the glass fibre rod arrived. These, being reasonably-priced, became the rod of choice for our cohort of impecunious anglers.

Designer jackets covered with pockets, to replace the tweed jacket, had not yet become the vogue and most of us fished in whatever gear we had – khaki shirts and shorts with old raincoats and canvas anoraks when the weather turned cold.

As the Second World War was a not too distant memory, most of us had access to, or had inherited, the issue canvas bags that had held gas masks during the war. If one was lucky, one had two, one for fishing gear and the other for the fish caught. The bags were loosely slung around the neck.

When I arrived at Giant's, the first thing that I admired about Bill's kit was that, for carrying fish, he had invented a viable alternative to the gasmask bag and the expensive wicker creel. This consisted of an old inner tube from a car tyre which was cut in half and neatly punctured at the base with a series of punched holes to allow for drainage of water and other fluids. Strips of canvas were riveted on either side of the cut ends of the tube and extended to a suitable length to go comfortably around the shoulder. An adequately-sized hole was cut along the upper side of the tube through which fish could be slid when caught, and, as the inner pocket of the tube was re-lined with freshly cut grass on each outing, the trout, gently wrapped in the grass, kept in splendid condition. So successful was this inner-tube creel that some are still in use today.

Personally I had good cause to celebrate the demise of the gasmask bag as, thanks to this piece of equipment, I had previously had a close shave with a puff adder on the banks of the Bushman's River. I was standing on a very high steep bank and had been casting into a long pool when I heard a hissing sound. I should add at this point, that one of the disadvantages of the canvas bag was that it tended to slip forward around one's body when moving or casting and had to be jerked back to the side from time to time. Assuming that a hiss had been caused by my bag scraping against my khaki shorts as I again jerked it backwards, I carried on fishing. Then I heard another, louder, hiss. Suddenly becoming conscious of the noise and realising that this time I had not moved the bag, I then grabbed it and held it tight against me. There was an even louder hiss and I looked over my shoulder to see a very large and irritated puff adder lying on the bank about fifteen centimetres from my backside. I had clearly swatted it on the nose with my bag and it was undoubtedly on the point of delivering a retributive bite at the offender.

According to Werner Helfer who was standing on the opposite bank of the river, he observed me bend forward from the centre of my body and then, with a loud cry, sprint away from the spot, climbing sharply and rapidly up the bank. Unfortunately when I reached the top of the bank, about three metres above, I also reached the edge of a deep donga that cut through the bank and down to the river. Werner observed my rod above the tall thatch grass reach a great height and then disappear ... accompanied by an even greater cry ... followed by a tremendous crash as I hit the bottom of the donga. Werner was the soul of sympathy as I lay badly shaken on the ground and a soft enquiry floated across the river: 'Greeted by a puff adder, were you?'

The inner-tube creels never hissed, ensuring that there was no confusion leading to terminal delays in speedy departures from one's occasional encounters with these very dangerous snakes.

The next innovation with respect to our trout gear was the belly belt. In 1963, while on a break at Umlalazi Nature Reserve up the north coast, I happened to meet the owner of what used to be Trotter's Jellies of Pinetown. In those days jelly was a popular dessert and Trotter's the most famous brand in Natal. While enjoying a sundowner with Mr Trotter, I mentioned that I was a game ranger in the Drakensberg. He immediately launched into an interesting tale. He had done some mountaineering himself and was aware of the problems caused by bulky and cumbersome

equipment. It transpired that he had invented a carry-all belly belt for medicines and first aid materials for mountaineers and, to his distress, not one mountaineer had ever shown the slightest interest in it. He considered that this belt, with narrow pockets sewn across the front, enabled the carrying of a good selection of items, comfortably stowed. Also it had a suitably narrow profile, as it had a neatly sewn covering flap. In his view this facilitated climbing, as there was little danger of it getting hooked up on the rock face. He ended by saying that he had had a whole lot of them made up at some expense and they were in a box in his house.

Sympathising with his financial loss and feeling obliged to show interest, I asked to see one of the belly-belts and was promptly presented with the box full of them. At first glance I saw that the idea had merit, not for first aid equipment, but to house fly boxes and spools of nylon. A vision of the end of the gasmask bag appeared like the Holy Grail in front of me. With some temerity I asked him whether he wanted to sell one to me and received the brusque response that I could take the 'whole bloody lot!' And Trotter's belly bag became standard equipment at Giant's Castle.

A final addition to the local kit was the development of the scabbard, or sleeve bag, for one's net. Most nets in those days were harp-shaped and hung around the neck with an elastic cord. When, in some of the wilder parts of the river one encountered bramble patches, the net had a nasty habit of being firmly embraced by the brambles. As you fished onwards, the net, remaining in the brambles' clutches, stretched the cord to the maximum and then, snapping free, turned the handle into a vicious projectile which would strike one on the back of the neck. This net-induced karate chop could not be endured, so the harp net was dispensed with and a longer collapsible net found favour. To defeat the still present bramble threat, a scabbard made from vinyl was manufactured which could be hung on the same belt as the belly bag, becoming the final part of the legendary Giant's Castle kit.

Strangely enough, following the introduction of the kit by our small group, we had the same experience as Mr Trotter. Many anglers expressed interest, but none outside of our close group, has ever attempted to emulate us. So, I fear, that with the demise of the last of us, so too will the kit go into extinction.

It should be made clear that Bill, despite having to catch fish in earnest in his youth, never lost the passion for and joy of catching trout. Although these emotions were held in check for most of the time (after all he was

Game Conservator and had a responsible job to do) the arrival of a warm front with gentle mist or a light rain had the same effect as a full moon on a werewolf. He would emerge from the house early in the morning crooning 'Teedle Deedle Dee!', waving his right arm as if casting with a fly rod. This was a clear signal that he felt that this was a day in which trout of unusual appetite and desirable size could be caught.

Needless to say there was always one of us who rushed back to the house to grab their fishing tackle. As I began to progress to second-in-command of the station, I accepted, without conscience or regret, the role of official supporter of Bill on the river and tasks requiring completion were delegated to the newer staff.

Over the four years I enjoyed dozens of hours on the Bushman's River¹ with Bill and we became quite competitive, but alas, I could never regularly match his skill and, at the end of the day, he always, without fail, would have me display my bag of fish first. Naturally I always left my largest fish until the last and, fixing him with an eager eye and filled with hope, I would display it on the table. Bill would allocate fulsome praise if it were a fish of two pounds or over and then, with maddening deliberation, would search through his bag until he found the fish that would beat mine. Placing it next to my trout, he would modestly announce that his was indeed slightly larger. One got used to failure but every now and again he would have an unlucky day. I would have caught a larger fish and his praise would set my spirit soaring. I loved that man.

Bill and I were truly thrashed in 1964 by Dave Cook, a fellow ranger, who joined us on the river one fine drizzly day and, through sheer luck, hooked into a large brown trout. Being an angler of limited talent (in my view) David refused to put pressure on his fish, claiming that he had a weak tippet (whatever that meant) and, having taken the obvious decision that he intended the fish to die of old age, Bill and I were doomed to sit next to the pool for four hours while the fish developed arthritis and other old-age maladies. When darkness fell I was despatched back to the reserve to get a torch so we could search for the stubborn trout in the ink-black water. Eventually the fish, presumably out of boredom or charity rose to the surface, was netted and carried triumphantly back to Giant's Castle. It weighed nearly four pounds. A magnificent river fish.

The pool is now known as 'Cook's Pool' and, in my eyes, will always stand testimony that there is little justice in this world. After fifty years of angling I have still to land a four pound brown trout in a river.



Dave Cook with his charitable catch

During my halcyon days at Giant's, Bill ensured that we visited many other rivers along the Natal side of the Drakensberg. Any duty requiring us to visit any of the Natal Park's Board stations or forestry stations would always, within the then existing angling seasons, see the trout equipment loaded into the vehicle – just in case there was time to throw a fly in the Mooi, Loteni, Injasuti, Umkomaas or Umzimkulu Rivers, or any other that we happened to pass by.

This was a practice that I later tried to continue as I took over responsibility for the western half of Natal and even as Chief Executive Officer in later life but, alas, opportunities never seemed to arrive, since Bill and I, as our responsibilities grew, worked harder and for longer hours.

Of course it was Bill who decided not long after my arrival that we should spend a day or two fishing in Basutoland and I was speedily introduced to the rivers nearest the head of the Langalibalele Pass – the Lekhalabaletsi and the Sanqubedu. Successfully stocked with brown trout many years before, conditions had proved so favourable that the rivers teemed with trout. Unfortunately as the numbers grew so, in turn, did the size and condition of the trout decline, so by the time I fished there regularly these rivers fairly quivered with a deprived and under-

nourished population. This made fishing rather unsporting. One could hurl in a line tipped with three flies and the water fairly foamed as fish attacked the flies from every direction, desperate to get something to eat. They were beautifully spotted but as lengthy and lean as the Clerk of Oxenford's horse², so one had to catch a fair bundle to get a decent meal. On the positive side we were doing the river a favour by thinning out the population. At least that was our argument.

Bill would often regale me with tales of the fantastic fishing he had enjoyed in the Semonkong River in the south of Lesotho, especially below the spectacular Malitsinyane Falls, over which the river fell for over 100 metres. Alas, I never managed to make the oft-discussed and long planned expedition to the Semonkong with Bill, but the desire to visit this angling Shangri La never dimmed and in 2004, at the invitation of Bill's daughter, Alison and her husband, Mervyn Gans, I at last made the trip and, with my patient wife Lee, spent several days on that beautiful river with the truly magnificent falls as a backdrop.

At the end of our second day as I was climbing out of the deep gorge below the falls in a state of near collapse, but warm in spirit, with a very fine plump rainbow trout of 1kg in my creel, Bill's grandson, Warren, observed me contemplating the scenery with obvious emotion. A lammergeyer spiralled high above us. Thinking as a modern youth and misinterpreting my emotion, he remarked 'Well, that is the Semonkong ticked off the bucket list!'

In truth he was correct. A long-desired ambition had been fulfilled, but Warren had no idea that, reminded by the lammergeyer, which was Bill's favourite bird, I had suddenly become, once again, conscious of the sad fact that Bill had died the previous year, his desire to return unfulfilled. How I would have liked to have been standing there, together with him, listening to his enthusiasm boil to the surface with the refrain ... 'Teedle Deedle Dee!'

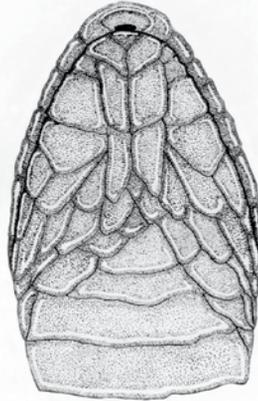
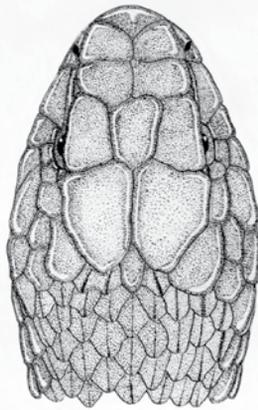
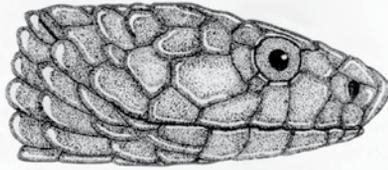
¹ The Bushman's River was stocked with brown trout in 1890 (R.S. Crass, *Freshwater Fishes of Natal*, 1964) and has never been restocked. In 1960 a small number of rainbow trout was introduced into the Shyaki Stream, one of the tributaries of the Bushman's but outside Giant's Castle Game Reserve. For some reason or other, although a few made their way into the Bushman's River they never established themselves and the Bushman's remains one of the prime brown trout rivers of South

Africa. Another unsuccessful introduction was the brook trout introduced into the Ncibidwane River, again just outside the protected area. Although Bill and I caught a small number of these exquisitely beautiful fish, they never attained any great size and soon disappeared, leaving the brown trout in possession of the river.

² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*



Malitsinyani Falls near Semonkong



Hemachatus haemachatus - (Lacépède)

Ring-necked Cobra or Rinkals

Giants Castle Game Reserve

1963

'Dave Cook and I prepared some attractive exhibits'