

## ARE TROUT SOUTH AFRICAN? OR: A POSTCOLONIAL FISH?

### Duncan Brown

(University of the Western Cape, Cape Town)

*Gazing at a river from the window of his writing retreat, flyrod and flybox to hand, Duncan Brown wonders what fish reveal about the historical borders of indigeneity, about legitimacy in the landscape, about belonging in the postcolony.*

Where trouts the size of salmon throng the creeks  
Roy Campbell. *The Wayzgoose* (1928).

In a discussion with his colleagues on the breakfast show of the national radio station 5FM about indigeneity and national symbols, and what could characterise the ‘indomitable South African spirit’, the DJ Gareth Cliff asked the newsreader Mabale Moloji what fish was to be found in every piece of freshwater in the country. “Trout”, she answered. Cliff corrected her, saying that it was the humble, hardy and almost indestructible barbel, which can cross land and survive drought by burying itself in mud for periods when the water dries up completely, which he claimed (semi-ironically) was a worthy emblem. As there are rapidly-increasing numbers of ‘trout farms’ around Gauteng where 5FM is based, and trout are widespread in the waters (and tourist literature) of Mpumalanga, which is a prime leisure area for Gautengers, Moloji’s error may be understandable.

It does, however, raise interesting questions about fish and their place in the landscape and the national imaginary. In this piece, which is from the Introduction to a book-length project, I focus



Fishing the Lourens  
Photo: Courtesy Tracey Brown

specifically on the introduction of trout to South Africa, and debates about their continued presence here. There have been many studies which use animal and plant species – herrings, cod, salmon, horses, cattle, maize – as ciphers in the writing of economic histories. While I refer to the economics of trout at various stages, this is not my focus: rather I am interested, in line with my background as a literary studies scholar, in the cultural and social issues around species like trout in South Africa, and more broadly the place of that which is termed ‘alien’ in the postcolony.

*I am interested ... in the cultural and social issues around species like trout in South Africa, and more broadly the place of that which is termed ‘alien’ in the postcolony.*

Several ‘exotic’ fish have historically been imported into South Africa: various carp species; largemouth, smallmouth and spotted bass; bluegills; rainbow and brown trout; and with less success, or more limited range, some salmon species and ‘golden trout’ (largely into stillwaters in Mpumalanga as unusual ‘trophy’ species). Twenty alien fish species are reputed to have been introduced. Of these species, the carps, basses and trouts have adapted best to local aquacimates, and become an integral part of the sport of recreational angling in the country (and to a lesser extent subsistence angling, some of it ‘illegal’), sustaining between them a host of magazines devoted entirely to their pursuit. The carp – notwithstanding the 5FM newsreader’s assumptions to the contrary – has established itself across the length and breadth of the country, and the complexities of its capture (involving patience, jealously-guarded and hotly-debated recipes for baits of various textures, colours and scents, and apparently a great deal of beer) becoming almost a national pastime, especially in inland areas. In some circles, the carp probably has the unofficial status of national fish (the galjoen actually having this official status). To complicate matters, while Cliff’s answer about the omnipresence of barbel is correct, the species known as the sharp-toothed catfish (*Clarias Gariepinus*) is a voracious predator which, while indigenous to parts of South Africa, does not occur ‘naturally’ in waterways across the subcontinent, to which it has nevertheless spread – partly through human intervention – with devastating consequences for endemic fish species: the Western Cape is a case in point.

There are two major species of trout in South Africa: the brown trout (*Salmo Trutta*), which is indigenous to Europe, parts of Asia, and Morocco, and

the rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus Mykiss*), which comes from the Pacific coast of North America. Both were introduced to South Africa in the late nineteenth century by colonial settlers with considerable effort (involving the transporting of unhatched ova in ice chests by ship). There were also attempts to introduce salmon and American brook trout, but these proved unsuccessful. Trout can only breed in running water, which must be cool and clean, so their presence is restricted to areas of suitable altitude or with a cool climate, and the presence of healthy, breeding trout populations, especially of rainbow trout, is a good indicator of water health. Adult trout can withstand temperatures of up to 25 degrees Celsius, but their ova die if temperatures rise above 16 degrees Celsius. Trout were introduced into the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Kwazulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Free State Province, Lesotho and Swaziland, and the trout populations which have established themselves in the upper reaches of the rivers in which they breed have – over many years – developed genetically to their habitats, including often exhibiting physical features which differ markedly from one river to the next (the trout in the Lourens River are regarded as amongst the prettiest in the country, and have a yellow hue to their fins). Stillwater trout tend to be less genetically varied, as they begin life in an artificial hatchery environment (with the exception of the few dams which have suitable feeder streams up which the trout can migrate to breed).

My interest in trout is threefold. At the outset I must admit that I am a flyfisher, with memories of learning to flyfish for trout with my father which stretch back more than thirty years, when there were no dedicated flyfishing shops in the country, and



River Beat 2, Lourensford  
Photo: Courtesy Tracey Brown

fishing with a fly was some sort of obscure, fringe activity. Being a flyfisher has been part of who I am for much of my life; it is constitutive of my identity in fundamental ways. From my rods unfurl lines into past and future generations. The Osprey 5/6 weight with which I most often fish stillwaters is a present my siblings and I bought for my father on his seventieth birthday, and which I inherited from him on his death in 1998. In the days when as an adolescent or young adult I frequently bumped heads with him, fishing always remained a way of talking about other

things. In the faded, gentle, floral surrounds of the hospice in which he died, towards the end he hallucinated about catching two four pounders, which – with some awkwardness and self-consciousness – I pretended to release for him off the end of the bed. His face showed the combination of pride and humility which always characterized his landing a good fish. On my second fishing trip after his death (on the first I blanked), I looked down in wonder at the two four pound trout on the stripping apron of my float tube, which I landed at Triangle dam in Underberg using his rod. (If truth be told, they may have been closer to five pounds, but perhaps they looked smaller from where he was.) On the pinboard beside my desk at home is a picture of me holding that rod, arced with a weight of one of the dozen trout I caught, along with a bout of severe bronchitis, float tubing in sub-zero temperatures in mid-winter on a dam outside Mooi River with my brother-in-law. Using the same rod, along with the reel and line which were given to my father as farewell presents from his last position as headmaster, my son Michael last month landed a fine fish at Lourensford.

My other rods all have, or are accruing, their own stories, of fish, people and places, including the four-weight four piece which I built myself, and which now spends most of its time in the hands of my son, and with which he learned to flyfish in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands, and the Orvis T3 – a Porsche amongst the Golfs which make up the rest of my stable of fishing rods – which my wife Tracey gave me as a present, and which is exquisite both to look at and fish with. Even here, on my writing retreat at Groot Brak during which I wrote this section (as well as another unrelated and more conventionally ‘academic’ piece), I look out over the river, and have

a flyrod, flybox and polarized sunglasses to hand, in case a tailing grunter or charging garrick appears to lure me away from more mundane research matters.

My second reason is more academic. Questions of indigeneity, and of the right to belong or be part of, raise themselves with greater or lesser degrees of complexity, aggression or insistency in public and private discourses in South Africa and many other postcolonial societies. Whether framed in terms of what one should plant in one's suburban garden, who has the right to 'speak for', what the priorities of state policy should be, who may work or reside in the country, or what is the basis for land claims, questions of who or what is 'natural' or indigenous to an area consistently return, despite abundant evidence that the putative essentialisms and selective histories which often underlie such arguments do not withstand even the most cursory scrutiny. Environmental discourses of 'indigenous' and 'alien' can cross very quickly into the human-political domain. Mulcock and Trigger cite Stephen Jay Gould in this regard – "How easy the fallacious transition between a biological argument and a political campaign" – and they note, "Subtle linguistic assumptions and linguistic slippages such as those that are commonly found in discourses about nativeness, naturalness and belonging can have significant implications".

Thirdly, and related to the second (and perhaps first) reason, is the increasing attention paid in literary and postcolonial studies to issues of environment and ecology, and especially the environmental transformations which colonial and imperial histories have wrought upon the (post)colony. There have been horrifying and hubristic interventions made by colonial authorities, whether in terms of the introduction of species (rabbits in Australia, black wattle,



The Lourens River  
Photo: Courtesy Tracey Brown

brambles and prickly pears in South Africa), physical alterations such as building dams or irrigation schemes, or the unintended introductions of species (such as khaki-bos and black jacks in the animal fodder brought into South Africa).

Leaving aside the more extreme and obvious problems such as those mentioned above, my question is: at what point do changes to landscape, fauna and flora become historical – for better or worse part of the history of human settlement in the region? Humans have always impacted on the environment (and despite how we may feel about this emotionally, extinctions have also been part of the biological history of our planet). Amongst many possible examples, one can mention the leafy vegetable *Corchorus Olitorius*, which originates in tropical Africa, and whose seeds were carried across the globe by slaves: its distribution is literally a vegetative narrative of imperial and colonial atrocity and survival. It has been grown in Egypt, under the name Mloukhia,

for so long that many regard it as the national dish.

At what point do changes to landscape, fauna and flora become historical – for better or worse part of the history of human settlement in the region?

In terms of what we classify as indigenous, how far back do we turn the clock? And does the trout, which I am using partly as metonymy for settler history and whose forebears arrived in South Africa at around the same time as mine, have a legitimate place in the landscape: has it become (like so many other species which have their origins outside the subcontinent but which are part of our everyday register of South Africanness – Nguni cattle, *Africanis* dogs, mealies, bushpigs, pumpkins, and for the 5FM newsreader apparently trout) if not indigenous, then at least indigenised? About the tension between 'indigeneity' and 'settlerdom', Dan Wylie says in his Introduction to the fascinating volume entitled *Toxic Belonging: Identity and Ecology in South Africa*: "This aspect of belonging provides the impetus behind a vast amount of South African historiography: indeed, it would not be too much to say that this tension *is* South African history". Specifically in relation to environmental debates, how and where do we factor in the complexities of the cultural-social-symbolic, which are integral to human understandings of their interactions with all forms of life, in many cases to their very sense of being and belonging?