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# UTOPIAN DREAM?

Simon Cooper warns of consequences if we stop stocking our chalkstreams



**I HAVE BEEN READING A FARMER'S YEAR** by Rider Haggard, best known for *King Solomon's Mines*, a lost world adventure that drew on his time in South Africa in the 1870s. On his return from South Africa he turned his hand to running the Norfolk farms his wife had inherited. In this, aside from novel writing, he found his vocation as an agricultural reformer, campaigning to highlight the dreadful condition of farm workers. In *Farmer's Year*, 1897, Haggard gives full throat to these issues and the farming practices of the time.

From our contemporary lofty perches, it is easy to assume that in the dying years of the Victorian age our countryside was some kind of rural Valhalla. The perfect melding of benign farming practices that produced homegrown, affordable, organic food while still preserving the traditional farming way of life within which native wildlife lived and thrived. The truth was somewhat different. British agriculture was in the second decade of an economic depression that would continue until the Second World War. More than 50 per cent of all food was imported. Farming income, and by implication wages, was falling with each passing year. Farm bankruptcy was the norm.

In the book Haggard travels to stay with a friend in Hertfordshire who has a chalkstream that runs through his land, which he is converting from a coarse-river [sic] into a trout water. Haggard describes the process:

"After most of the pike are extracted — for it takes years to be rid of them — the bed of the stream must be cleaned. Then comes its restocking with thousands of young trout bought at a hatchery; the making of suitable spawning beds by the carting of gravel into the water, or the stirring up and washing of such stone as already exists there; the sowing of water-weeds suitable to the collection of food such as trout love, and so forth. All these things are necessary if trout fishing is to be enjoyed in such a stream, yet so much preparation gives a certain artificiality to the final result."

Haggard is, of course, right: the chalkstreams we so love

for our sport are artificial. A landscape bent to the will of man. In that, there is nothing wrong or sinister. But not everyone sees it that way. There is a growing cabal within the statutory bodies tasked with regulating our land and rivers, abetted by enthusiastic conservation bodies, who are intent on promoting a Utopian dream for our chalkstreams.

Their imagined state of things in which everything is perfect goes something like this: take what we have today; manage it with a light hand; end all stocking. And, with a mighty leap, we will find ourselves amid sunlit valleys where fishing is as it was always meant to be. A dream that is as fantastical as the jewels of King Solomon.

The truth is that chalkstreams designed for trout fishing require stocking. This is no new innovation. It has been going on since the 1840s when fly-fishing first became fashionable. Even the high priest of the dry-fly, Frederic Halford, was a believer — remnants of his stock ponds remain today behind his Oakley Hut at Mottisfont Abbey. Our native brown trout is hardy and adaptable, but he or she is a loner. They don't brook much competition, carving out a solitary territory by eliminating the competition. This means you'll find in any wild trout chalkstream a large cohort of small fish but very few fish of what most of us would regard as of catchable size.

This is Mother Nature's natural order of things and none the worse for that, should that be your ultimate aim. But if you wish to see the chalkstreams for what they were created — a destination for the sport of fly-fishing — then stocking has to be part of the creation equation. Anyone who tells you otherwise has interests other than yours at heart. ■

*Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.*