

# WHERE TO FISH IN 2020

*29 must-visit fisheries in the UK and Ireland*

**WIN**  
A SCIENTIFIC  
ANGLERS  
LINE

# TROUT & SALMON

THE VOICE OF GAME-FISHING SINCE 1955

## SIX MILES OF SILVER

Salmon and sea-trout  
30 minutes from Glasgow

## FOND FAREWELL

TRIBUTES TO  
BOB CHURCH AND  
JOHN KENNEDY



## NYMPH RODS TESTED

*The latest river tools put through their paces*

### GIFTS FROM THE GELT

Feisty brownies from  
a northern stream

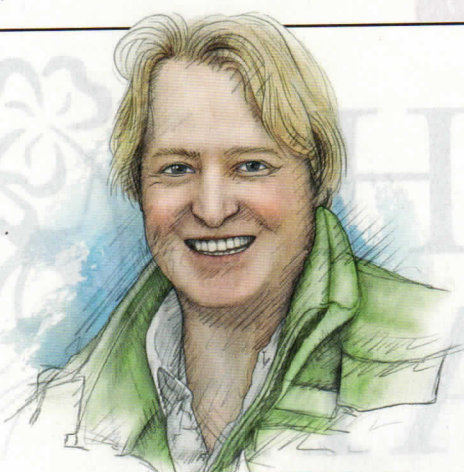
### HOW OFTEN SHOULD YOU CHANGE YOUR FLY?

### RUSSIAN REVELATION

Fish an unsung salmon and  
trout river on the Kola







## CHALK TALK

# The catch in releasing

*Simon Cooper questions the dogma of do-gooders*

**I**'VE BEEN IN THIS BUSINESS FOR MORE than half a lifetime; when I set out, Margaret Thatcher was still living at No. 10 – that's how many Prime Ministers ago? I hesitate to count them because the number might easily change between me writing this column and publication day. Over that time the political hues may have altered a great deal, but fly-fishing has remained remarkably unchanged. Yes, the kit may have become whizzier and our destinations more exotic, but we still do essentially the same thing in the same manner as our forebears. Excepting one thing: catch-and-release.

The change has been gradual. In the early days of my company, Fishing Breaks, catch-and-release was far from being the norm. There was little demand for catch-and-release generally and compulsory catch-and-release beats were anathema to most. On nearly all my chalkstreams you were required to keep every fish you caught, the only exception being those under 12in. The bag limit was usually four. A six-fish limit was quite the marketing tool. You most definitely paced your day: late starts, long lunches, *The Times* crossword.

But from beyond our horizons, notably from North America, came word of something different. No longer would your day be truncated. No longer would you have to take home fish you probably didn't want to eat. You'd be preserving life instead of snuffing it out. In the argot of modern youth, what's not to like? In little more than a decade the catch-and-release community went from the few to the many. Not only did it suit the purposes of our changing fishing habits, but it also seemed to put us on the right side of a more caring attitude to the natural world.

But is catch-and-release the panacea to a better fishing world? Is it the one-size-fits-all solution to our environmental woes?

I'll lay my cards on the table. I hate killing fish for whatever reason or purpose. But I'm far from convinced that makes me a better person or guardian of the rivers. Let me explain. Not everyone likes fishing. Some actively disapprove of it. In a meeting with those beliefs, an angler who catches for the pot has an easy moral justification. But catch-and-release? Accusations of cruelty in the name of sport are hard to bat away without the justifiable, but harder to argue, explanation that the fishing community's investment in the health of our rivers brings environmental benefits.

It's what you might call a moral dilemma.

What about the practical?

On the face of it, catch-and-release is manna from Heaven for the fishery owner. On an all-wild river it apparently preserves the indigenous population and on a stocked river fewer fish are required. But it is not quite that simple. Fish might not be the brightest of buttons, but they are not daft. Learned behaviour is the secret to a long life. In the same way that they learn what to eat, they soon learn what not to eat. Silhouette. Waving stick. Line shadow. Odd-looking metal thing. Hook-shy is not a riverine myth. Stocking has to continue as the uncatchables stack up in the river. And there is little hope that the majority will "unlearn" over the winter because fewer than four in ten stocked fish will survive to the following year.

On an all-wild river you'd think all catch-and-release would be a no-brainer; the essential requirement to a balanced and thriving population. But the age mix of the trout population might suggest it is of less benefit than you might think. To start with more than 80 per cent of the trout population is irrelevant to the debate – under three years of age and therefore below the usual 12in threshold. That leaves the remaining adult population of between four and six years of age; as trout don't live much older than this we

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can assume at least a third of that group will die each year regardless of angling intervention. A few for the BBQ on a sympathetically run fishery is probably doing little more than hastening the inevitable.

Therefore, much that I like catch-and-release for myself, I am uncomfortable with the Orwellian mantra promoted by some official bodies and organisations that releasing is "good" and "keeping" is bad. The argument is more nuanced than that. There is room for both as both are good in different ways. In the decades and centuries past, anglers have nearly always been proved to be the greatest guardians of our fish, so now we can fairly ask: where were those people then who choose now to tell us what we should do? **T&S**

■ Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks ([fishingbreaks.co.uk](http://fishingbreaks.co.uk)), the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is also author of the best-selling *Life of a Chalkstream* and *The Otters' Tale*.