

# GREEN SHOOTS

Simon Cooper examines how Covid is affecting the fly-fishing business



**C**REATIVE DESTRUCTION. IT IS A brutal economic theory we are living through today, but one we've lived through before in recent times. Norman Tebbit, as Employment Minister in the first Thatcher administration, personified the cold reality of human capital with his often-misquoted remark about his father riding his bike to seek work in the 1930s. A dozen years later Chancellor of the Exchequer Norman Lamont twisted the knife in the body of compassionate Conservatism when he posited that unemployment was the price worth paying to end the recession and cure inflation.

Lamont wasn't saying anything new. Karl Marx wrote about creative-destructive tendencies inherent in capitalism. A century later, Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter wrote of this "gale of creative destruction ... mutation that continuously revolutionises the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one".

It sounds insane that any economic good could come from this Covid blight; that the concept of creative destruction might benefit the recreational angling industry. But let me give you a few examples, not least starting with this magazine, which has seen subscriptions rise since the start of the pandemic.

Fishing Breaks' American agents, Sweetwater Travel ended 2020 fried to a frazzle having jammed two years' business into four months of summer. Its boss told me he expects to sell 80 outfits a season; in 2020, it was more like 200-300. Rodmaker Sage had a bumper year, too. Closer to home, Stockbridge, the capital city of fly-fishing on the River Test, has thrived like never before. Our tackle stores boomed. Robjent's, a byword for personal service, rolled out mail-order deliveries for the first time. The Orvis shop had a stellar summer, as clients adapted to the "new normal" becoming, in the jargon, omnichannel consumers, online and instore.

But there is destruction, with all the pain and heartache that follows. My fish supplier of 20 years has closed down. It's a blow. Trevor, the farm manager, is a true friend and his fish were absolutely the best. But it forced me to re-evaluate. In my heart of hearts, I felt we were probably paying too much for the fish and were wedded to one supplier when we should have been using two or three. But Trevor's fish are not gone forever. The broodstock has gone to one farm and the yearlings to another, both of whom we will use.

Generally, we're definitely all better at responding to customers' demands.

Finally, we mustn't forget the greatest creative destructor of all – Mother Nature. My chalkstreams have been stripped of *ranunculus* by winter rains. The weed we nurtured all spring. Lovingly cut through the summer. Gazed admiringly at as the product of fine river management. It's all gone. But God is a diligent gardener. His pruning by nature has left billions of tiny green shoots ready to sprout from the gravel in spring.

But not everyone or everything survives. A cull is on. A fifth of adult brown trout that start the winter will end it dead. Some will succumb, bodies depleted by the rigours of spawning. Some will become food so others will live. Some will have simply reached the end of their natural term. It is brutal out there for just about every creature in our chalkstreams. But that is the way it has to be. When the weak die, so do their genes. Successful species demand that.

It seems where nature leads mankind follows. Creative destruction is the human face of Darwinism. ■

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