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# TROUT & SALMON

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# AS FADS GO...

...rewilding is one of the worst,  
writes Simon Cooper



**A FEW MONTHS AGO, I DROPPED BY A** place I regularly visit where 15 or so dolphins live in what was once the dry dock of a naval dockyard built in early Georgian times to protect the Empire. I know these sorts of places, along with zoos and animal circuses, have rather fallen out of favour, but I still love them. How else can you ever appreciate the beauty and power of such sea creatures? Sure, there is David Attenborough, but that is no more real than an avatar for a best friend.

Chatting to one of the volunteers – it is a place that has nurtured the dreams of countless marine-biologists-to-be – I asked about the steel gate that barred the entrance to the open ocean. Is it ever lifted? I asked. Oh yes, she replied, every day. I was agog. Don't they just bugger off? The answer is, apparently not. Some never venture beyond the confines of the old dock and those that do mostly do a circuit of the harbour before returning. Occasionally, one will be daring, and even less occasionally, lost, until, since they are all tagged, the dinghy goes out to find the adventurer to guide him or her home. To date, none have not returned.

All of which got me thinking about stocking our chalkstreams as the Environment Agency (EA) are on manoeuvres again; reactivating a policy based on "rewilding" that many of us hoped had died a death in pandemic times. The EA's reasoning for this mutton-headed policy is, as far as I can ascertain, that stocked fish have a deleterious impact on native brown trout and migratory Atlantic salmon. For the latter, we are led to believe marauding packs of slob trout, erstwhile stocked fish who have dropped back to the estuaries, are gobbling up juvenile salmon as they head for sea. Let me be clear about this – there is absolutely no research to support this belief.

As for the wild trout population, in my 30 years as a chalkstream professional, I have never known the rivers so well populated with wildies, despite the many slings and arrows thrown at them by agriculture, sewage, abstraction and predation from both fur and feather. It might seem contradictory, but actually brown trout are really tough – they can survive and thrive in the most unlikely places and conditions, which is why they are the most widely distributed native fish across our nation and a national export to every continent except Antarctica. And frankly, as a wild trout you are not going to be put off your stride by some blow-in stockie; in cartoon terms, it is Wile E. Coyote versa Road Runner, where both survive in imperfect harmony.

So why, might you ask, did the dolphins put me in mind of brown trout? Well, we cannot unmake the world we have created. Until man ceases to exist, it will be impossible to return the world to the way it was before we existed. If we released the dolphins into the wild (or had never captured them in the first place) would the natural balance of the oceans be restored? Not a bit of it. In the same way, if we ceased stocking a few hundred miles of British river, out of the 36,000 miles, would this free us from our current riverine ills with a mighty bound? Again, not a bit of it.

Rewilding is a fad, and a bad one at that. The sooner we understand it for what it is – the bucolic equivalent of rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic – the better. ■

*Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at [fishingbreaks.co.uk](http://fishingbreaks.co.uk)*