

EXCLUSIVE: PATAGONIA'S LATEST SEA-TROUT DESTINATION

TROUT & SALMON

THE VOICE OF GAME-FISHING SINCE 1955

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CHALK TALK

Another brick in the wall

Simon Cooper hopes a rare species of salmon will gain more protection in 2019

AS THE EDITOR ANNOUNCED IN THE December issue, 2019 has been designated the International Year of the Salmon (IYS), an initiative that brings together people and bodies across the Northern Hemisphere to address the decline in the Atlantic and Pacific salmon populations. I am not sure whether history will just note IYS as a last desperate roll of the dice, but it must be done: on the chalkstreams we have fallen so far, so fast, that it makes Icarus's descent look like a gentle parachute float.

When you consider the bigger picture, I know you might think me a little parochial, but it is not often you get to witness the destruction of a distinct species first hand in the space of half a lifetime. In the 1970s, the five chalkstreams with their own sub-species of *Salmo salar* - Avon, Frome, Itchen, Piddle and Test - have gone from being duo-species rivers (brown trout and Atlantic salmon) to mono-species (brown trout) from a sporting perspective. I distinctly recall in my youth that I had a mental map of the river catchments with a dividing line on each: upstream of the line for trout, downstream for salmon.

Today, such a line is pointless. Where once salmon were prolific, today they are non-existent. How have we gone from plenty to nothing? Where are the times when Southern Television would send a camera crew to record the opening day, returning to the studio after an hour with a salmon in the can? Or the children who would stare in wonderment as silvery bodies leapt the salmon ladder at Romsey Mill? Times when salmon were so numerous they were considered a menace to the trout when competing for spawning beds, to the point that on the upper stretches of the River Test, landowners blew salmon out of the water with shotguns.

I wish I could give you here and now the answers to my own questions, but I can't. And it seems nobody can. If you read the papers. Make the best you can of the science. Talk to those who have spent years charting the decline and you'll

probably come away more dispirited than when you started. That graph is forever ticking downward with no apparent way of averting an inevitable flat-lining.

I suppose to a certain extent you might feel free to ask how much this matters. The economic imperatives that drove the need to sustain a healthy salmon population are long gone, memories of cottage industries such as the estuary netmen only sustained by sepia photos on pub walls. And as for the fishing, well there is a band of dedicated and knowledgeable chalkstream salmon aficionados, who, to their credit, keep the flame alive. But for the rest of us, wallets permitting, the rivers of Iceland and northern Russia are just a few hours' flight away for a fix of the *salar* opiate.


One in 10,000

But then I read a study from the University of Exeter that made me realise how very special chalkstream salmon are. We know that Atlantic salmon have a propensity to return to their natal rivers, but it's a fairly flexible return with the distinct genetic strains encompassing large geographical regions such as the Baltic, and returning salmon spawning in different rivers to mix up the genes over millennia. But not on the chalkstreams.

Those five rivers, which spill into just a 45-mile stretch of the southern English coastline, have remained stubbornly different. Their natives readily mix with different mates among the five rivers, but they never stray elsewhere and nobody much else visits; less than one salmon in 10,000 in a chalkstream will be anything other than a chalkstream salmon. They are not even like their immediate neighbours. In genetic terms, the salmon of Devon and Cornwall have more in common with those of Norway than those of Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire.

And it is not just genetics that make chalkstream salmon different; they have a hard-scrabble introduction to life. The juvenile chalkstream salmon migrates to the sea after just a year; on most other rivers it is commonly two or three years. Which creates a distinct problem. For if (let's not even contemplate when) the last chalkstream salmon expires due to the hand of man, then that will be it. We will not be able to seed our barren rivers with imports. They will simply not survive: those genetic specialisations occurred at the behest of Mother Nature for very good reasons.

So, at least for me, that is why this matters. I don't want to be part of the generation that presided over the extinction of a species that was millions of years in the making. I know salmon don't make great media stories like pandas or white rhinos, but I have come to understand that Mother Nature has built a great and beautiful edifice. As a whole it is tough and it is strong and daft humans like us can kick out a few bricks here and there with little fear of collapse. But one day, if we don't moderate our destructive tendencies, we'll kick out one brick too many. Here's hoping that IYS will produce something great to stay the next kick at the wall.

■ My thanks to Dr Jamie Stevens at the University of Exeter. The paper I referenced is: "Atlantic salmon *Salmo salar* in the chalk streams of England are genetically unique" by C. Ikediashi *et al* (2018). *Journal of Fish Biology*, vol 92: 621-641. Web: doi.org/10.1111/jfb.13538 

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