

AMATOLA FLY FISHING CLUB

Incorporating the Frontier Acclimatisation Society and the Stutterheim Trout Angling Club



NEWSLETTER – AUTUMN / MAY 2017

Let's start with some exciting news. On January 29th, around 2520, 14cm/33g brown trout were stocked into Gubu (there were also an additional 280 rainbows included in the mix). A massive thank you is due to Devin Isemonger and Hylton Lewis. They drove through the night from Du Toitskloof (near Cape Town) to deliver the fish to Gubu, where Karl Krull was kindly waiting with his boat and the stocking team did their thing spreading the fish around. An equally big thank you is due to Andre Bok of Pure Ocean for the provision of his and Hylton's cutting-edge, fish transport tank and system, and to Grant Wylie for the loan of equipment. Without the equipment offered to us, it would have been near-impossible to move 107kg of live trout, 975km at the height of summer. Not a single fish was lost. Remember to thank all of these people loudly and clearly when you see them.

The amazing thing to me about these browns is that they are from ova that was spawned in Denmark, flown to S.A., hatched by Molapong Aquaculture and are now in Gubu. That is a journey of some 15 000km. The best news is that they are doing very well and are being caught; the biggest ones are about 27cm, which is exceptional growth especially given that browns generally grow slower than rainbows and that Gubu isn't very productive.

On that note, I continue to field questions of "where are the big fish in Gubu". I don't have all of the answers. I know we have all been expecting bigger fish from the consistently successful stockings we've been doing since 2013, but there remains a dearth of fish bigger than about 1.4kg. I have and continue to consult widely on the reasons for this but without formalized research, all the ideas and theories that get thrown about are really just unsubstantiated thoughts and hearsay. So, Dr. Olaf Weyl, a highly acclaimed ichthyologist from SAIAB in Grahamstown, and who is also a fish-head angler, has offered to get officially involved and design and supervise a study of the dynamics of Gubu's trout and fishery. David Taylor, one of the club's hot-rod young-guns and a fish nut in his own right, currently studying ichthyology at Rhodes, has been proposed as the man on the ground for the job. To my knowledge, this will be the first time that a South African trout stillwater will have real science invested in it, so let's see where all of this goes.

I spent some time on the phone earlier this week discussing the trends that Dr. Weyl was able to recognize from the catch data that was collected during the ECFF trials held at Gubu last weekend (during which 86 fish were caught). Dr. Weyl commented that the year classes were clearly visible, that there appeared to be no obvious competition between the year classes, and that the mortality rate appeared to be normal. He said the data was indicating

that the survival rate to the fourth year was somewhere between 7–9% of the initial stocking. This was interesting as it's consistent with the (theoretical) 5%/8%/10% scenarios that I have been applying in the stocking-calculator model that I wrote a few years back and have been using.

What I'm thinking now, is that the biggest rainbows (averaging about 48cm) that we are currently seeing in Gubu are in fact four year old fish and won't grow much more before they die. Dr. Weyl has agreed to age some of our fish, so that will quickly tell the truth. If our four year old fish are only growing to 1.4kg then why did we have bigger fish at times in the past? I've studied most of the old catch records and I can say that based on what anglers reported, there are only two big-fish periods, namely 1994/95 and 2005/06. One of the reasons for the 94/95 spike could have been the 70,000 (mixed size) fish that were stocked in 1989. Most rainbows will die in their fourth year, but some will make it to five years old, and which extra year allows an extra year of growth. Lets's say 0.5% make it to five years, that would've meant 3500 five year old (bigger) fish available to be potentially caught. For the 2005/06 spike, the main reason was probably the triploid rainbows stocked in 2001 and 2002. Triploids don't develop reproductive organs and don't go into breeding states, so the extra available energy goes to faster growth and they live longer due to not becoming egg bound, so grow bigger. But amongst other factors, triploids are expensive to stock as there's a high mortality in the hatchery and triploids have been phased out in South African hatcheries in the last while.

Something else that we have to keep in mind is that Gubu's temperature regime isn't what it used to be. For the last three years, the surface temp in mid-May has been 19/20 deg. C. Previously, the surface temp was an ideal 15/16 deg. C by early April already. So it means that fish are having higher metabolism rates for longer and less of their energy is thus available for growth. If the food supply stays the same, and it's certainly not increased in the warmer temps, as well as may have shifted the food-species abundance to higher numbers of smaller organisms, then the trout growing seasons are shorter now than they were in the recent past.

Most of the rest of the big fish at Gubu have come willy-nilly and often following years with very low stockings, i.e very low competition for large-sized food. So it's possible to have bigger fish, but instead of catching the current 10 – 20 fish a day in Gubu, one would have to be happy with the 0 – 2 that we remember from those leaner years. In the end it's all about finding a happy balance. And as I've explained before, it's definitely not as simple as lower stockings equal bigger fish. The holy grail to my mind is finding what's the biggest number of fish we can have without having one year class compromise the growth of the others. What I am proposing this year IS a lower stocking of rainbows (around 12 500), to see if the third and fourth year fish won't be able to make better use of the reduced pressure on the small food (plankton, like daphnia and phantom midge larvae) that it appears is what usually sustains the good growth in the one and two year old fish.

There is really very little that we can do differently. I believe that the timing and size and way that we stock is the best we can do; the first and second year survival rates show this. After that we can play with the numbers, which we have been doing and are still doing this year, and then the only other change is the sex and source of the fish (genetics and species). I have requested mixed-sex again this year, so that reduces the number of hens that will be prone to being egg bound. The question of genetics is perhaps valid, and although costly and complicated, could be tested. And then of course there's fiddling with the species mix. I'm of the opinion that the browns will do very well in Gubu, and will make better use of the goby population than the rainbows (and a reduction in the goby numbers might have additional positive spinoffs e.g. a resurgence in the minnow numbers), plus the browns should live twice as long as the rainbows (i.e. have more time to grow). So in a perfect world we can hope that in future, the browns will provide the size (quality) and the rainbows the numbers (quantity) in Gubu and make for the best fishery we can make it. That said, it's the plan to stock with browns every year or at least every second year, but we are still trying to map a plan for a consistent supply of browns; it too is complicated!

Maden seems to be doing just fine, so there's no plan to meddle with things there.

There have been some additions and updates to the AFFC website: the draft constitution is on display, check it out and comment if necessary, the last chance for comment is this year's AGM. We must say thank you to David Marais for his considerable input into the text to ensure the necessary bases are covered. Also, under the "Media" tab you'll find the history of the Frontier Acclimatisation Society has been written up by John van der Merwe, thank you John. For those who don't know how trout came to be in our area, go and read the account of the unimaginable drama that folks went to to transport ova from the Northern Hemisphere a 135 years ago.

An updated subs renewal and membership form is also available on the website. We have decided not to adjust the fees for the 2017 – 2018 year (you're welcome!). Let's hope that decision doesn't bite us in the ass.

Re. maintenance in and around Gubu Dam, visitors will notice that the stand of pines along the south bank of Doctors has been removed. This is a big plus. It means less nitrogen lost, less acidic tannins seeping into the dam, etc., and when the indigenous growth reestablishes, the margins will be healthier and have more life. Thank you to John Rance jr. and Francois Sparks and the rest of the forestry guys for getting the job done. The important thing now is that they not rest on their laurels and go get the rest done! Francois' and Craig Warren's fencing team will also be tackling the clubhouse fence soon, and for which we are all highly appreciative. Inside the clubhouse there are now "No Smoking" signs. That's to remind the huffers and the puffers that a club is, as a legal entity, a public space and national law prohibits smoking inside closed spaces. A mystery person also replaced the broken toilet seat in the ladies' toilet, thank you to you. A number of people

have volunteered to get stuck into upgrading our bathrooms but twixt cup and lip there's been a slip, so please keep volunteering.

Myself and Martin von Holdt attended the FOSAF National AGM recently hosted by the Angler & Antelope in Somerset East. Alan and Annabelle Hobson put on a fine show and threw in a whole lot of fishing too, so it was a lot more fun than it was meeting. However, lots of productive discussions were had and I can tell you that behind the scenes there's a small, core group of folks working very hard, mostly for free, on some important issues. I will elaborate and discuss subsequent developments at the AGM.

Please diarize the weekend of 18 - 20 August as the time for our annual get together, fishing competition and AGM. It's a week earlier than originally planned, partly due to my having to be elsewhere during the first week of September.

See below some recent catches, and remember handle our fish for release very carefully, which means wet hands, fine-mesh/knotless nets, very short "air time", and if you aren't doing it already, try flattening your hook barbs, you'll be amazed that your hooking rate increases and that it's only the tiny racing snakes that sometimes shake loose.

Edward Truter



A 27cm brown trout caught in Gubu by Gareth Webster on the 27th May.

Ryan Smith with a Maden Dam Rainbow caught on the 6th May 2017.

