

BEFORE THE INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONERS

IN THE MATTER of the Resource Management Act
1991

AND

IN THE MATTER of the Proposed Variation 1 to the
Proposed Canterbury Land and
Water Regional Plan

**ADVOCATE EVIDENCE OF ALLAN FIFE ON BEHALF OF NORTH
CANTERBURY FISH AND GAME COUNCIL AND THE ROYAL FOREST
AND BIRD PROTECTION SOCIETY**

September 2014

North Canterbury Fish and Game Council

Environmental Advisor – Scott Pearson

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1. My name is Allan Fife. I have fished extensively in the Te Waihora catchment since 1983. I am a fly fisherman and I fish exclusively for trout. I have biology/botany degrees, but I am not an ecologist.
2. The brown trout fisheries of the Te Waihora catchment are legendary. I think that many of you will know something of the brown trout spawning runs in the Selwyn River. These large runs had many tens of thousands of fish and were reputedly the largest runs of brown trout in the South Island. These runs occurred well before I started fly fishing in Canterbury. The runs in the Selwyn went into serious decline in the 1970's or possibly before.
3. I was lucky to have a very good friend, Vic Novis, a highly accomplished Canterbury lure fisherman, who told me a great deal about this remarkable fishing, much of it in the L2 and Selwyn. He fished almost exclusively at night, using large lures (bait fish imitations) and he caught more large brown trout than any angler I have ever known. Sadly Vic, who owned a fishing hut at the Upper Selwyn Huts for many years, passed away about 2 months ago. There is little question that the fisheries associated with the Waihora tributaries were some of the best in New Zealand and hence "world class". There are well-established traditions of fly fishing and fly design, and many of the "classic" NZ lure patterns and fly tying styles were developed in Canterbury and particularly on the Waihora tributaries. There is, for example, a lure pattern called the Harts Creek. I guess this had a better ring than the L2.
4. When I immigrated to Canterbury and began fishing the Waihora tributaries in the early 1980s, Harts Creek was an outstanding trout stream, whereas the L2 was heavily polluted with sewerage and the lower reaches of the Selwyn held little attraction to me. I was more interested in fishing Harts Creek. Whether Harts Creek was as good then as in previous decades, I cannot say. But it was not uncommon during the 1980s and through much of the 1990s to see as many as 200 substantial trout during daylight hours in the lower reaches of Harts Creek (that is, in the 1200 meters of HC between what I call the Timberyard Road stock yards and the stream mouth). The trout spawned in the gravel beds of the upper reaches of Harts Creek and Birdlings Brook, and many of them stayed in the upper reaches after spawning.
5. I have fished Harts Creek, for nearly the entire length with particular intensity since 1983, so I will focus on my experiences of that stream. I can only guess at the number of times I have fished this stream; my best estimate is about 200 times. I have also visited Harts Creek many times for other reasons, e.g. walking, tree planting, and bird watching.
6. Until at least the late 1990s it was a frequent event to see large numbers of trout (c. 2 to 10 lbs or even greater) in what I will term the lower reaches of Harts Creek. Large numbers of trout were most frequent during the late summer and autumn months of February to April, but from time to time large numbers of trout occurred in spring and early summer months. It was often difficult to closely estimate the number of fish in the stream due to fish movement during the day, but my fishing companions & I tried; we often made estimates of c. 200 or even greater. My best kept records are from 1995–1998. Just to place a few figures on the graph, my observations include:
 - 18 Feb. 1996...estimated 300 fish in Lower Harts Creek;
 - 24 March 1996: Lower Harts Creek "thick with sea-run fish";
 - 30 March 1996 "fish of all sizes and in numbers scattered throughout" Lower Harts Creek;
 - 21 April 1996: "many enormous fish near mouth of Lower Harts Creek;
 - 27 April 1996: "Hundreds of fish of all sizes (to 10 or even 15 pounds) in schools in Lower Harts Creek and fish taking nymphs at irregular intervals" Hooked 7 and Landed 5 fish in 2 hours (then I broke my fly rod!)

And in spring time:

- 2 Oct 1996; Lower Harts Creek with only “few small fish”;
- 10 Nov 1996; c. 200 fish in Lower Harts Creek;

And autumn again:

- 8 March 1997; 2 modest sized schools in Lower Harts Creek; fish very disturbed (by rock throwing teenagers) 7 fish caught;
 - 15 March 1997; “surprisingly few fish for this time of year...no large schools
 - 6 April 1997; “moderate numbers, (but far fewer than in April 1996)”;
- 4 fish to 4.5 lbs caught in 3.5 hours

7. In my opinion, the finest angling was usually in March/April; fewer fish were usually present during other months. However whether this was due to migration in/out of the stream, weather conditions, visibility, lake levels, etc. I cannot venture a guess. The large numbers in the early autumn were due to the onset of spawning in the upper reaches of the Creek. The water was generally very clear and the beds of submerged plants (mostly *Myriophyllum* sp., *Potamogeton* sp.) were well-established and covered a substantial fraction of the stream bed. These beds provided cover for the fish, as well as for invertebrates, bullies, etc. There were scattered “holes” (perhaps associated with springs) in Lower Harts Creek that usually held numerous trout, and often yielded them to well-presented nymphs on fine leaders.
8. During the 1980s and 1990’s I knew many anglers who fished at/near the mouth of Hart Creek at night with large, dark lures. Fish of ten pounds (in N.Z. ten pound trout were and are considered “trophy fish”) were commonplace and larger fish were not rare; this was “classic” Canterbury lure fishing.
9. I often encountered young anglers at HC, mostly teenage boys from the Leeston area. I enjoyed giving them some pointers and often a few flies and it was especially gratifying to see some of them repeatedly at HC and beginning to have some success. HC is not an easy place to learn how to fly fish.
10. I sometimes fished well upstream of the stock yards, on the properties of John McLachlan and Tim & Rose Chamberlain (Harts Creek Farm, near Lochheads Road). The fish there were generally smaller, but so was the stream; the fly fishing was marvellous in a crystal clear spring fed creek. In 1997 I took a teenager interested in learning to fly fish to the upper reaches of the creek (on Harts Creek Farm) and watched him catch and return his first trout on a dry fly.
11. However, by the late 1990s HC and its fishery seemed to me in marked decline and I was very concerned about the survival of the brown trout fishery at HC.
 - the banks in Lower Harts Creek were “pugged” by cattle;
 - the silt load seemed to be increasing and siltation of the steam bed was greater;
 - the beds of aquatic plants in Lower Harts Creek were disappearing;
 - far fewer fish were present in the middle and upper reaches (and I largely stopped visiting there) ;
 - algal blooms were increasingly frequent in the lower reaches.
12. In January 1999 I decided to visit one of the landowners whom I had met to tell him of the deterioration in stream health that I was seeing. Peter’s property is on Birdlings Stream, the one significant tributary of Harts Creek. He was certainly interested and investigated on his own. In late 1999 or early 2000 a group of Harts Creek landowners including Peter Chamberlain and Donald Patterson, representatives of Regional Council

(I think David Hewson & Phil McGuigan), and a few others, met at the Regional Council to discuss what might be done to prevent further deterioration of HC.

13. A Streamcare Group was organized, with Peter Chamberlain as its first Chair. Regional Council (and perhaps other) funding was obtained for restoration plantings (organized by David Hewson, Peter Chamberlain, etc). I would like to acknowledge the great efforts over many years that the landowners along Harts Creek and Birdlings Brook have given to protect and improve the stream. I have had very pleasant relations, over many years, with many of them.
14. The quality of the fishing in HC during this time did begin to improve within a few years of the establishment of the StreamCare group. Whether this was strictly a cause and effect situation I cannot say.
15. However despite this progress, over the last 5-10 years I admit to having visited HC less often. My less frequent visits were largely because of my perception that the fishery entered another period of decline. The aquatic weed beds are certainly reducing in size, and at times are completely absent from the lower reaches. The reasons for this I can only speculate on: increased siltation, dissolved nutrients levels in ground water, generally lower and warmer water levels, grazing by waterfowl and/or herbivorous fish may be possible reasons, but I leave attempted explanations to others more qualified. I did go to Lower Harts Creek a few times during the 2013-2014 season but with very limited fishing success. When I did visit in 2013-2014, the number of visible fish in Lower Harts Creek were always in the few tens or less, rather than the much larger numbers often seen in the 1990s.
16. But I did visit the Creek about ten days ago, in part to get my bearings for this evidence. The restoration plantings and willow removal along HC have been on-going and have been expanded considerably. Cattle are completely fenced out of the lower reaches. The visibility into the stream was not ideal (it was late afternoon) and I could see no trout. I did, however, seen 9 Great Crested Grebes (the most I have ever seen at once) very near to the stream mouth, heard the booming of Matuku (bitterns) and saw a wide variety of other aquatic birds.
17. If the current phase of deterioration of the Harts Creek fishery continues...whatever its cause.... its loss will be a great loss to the anglers of the Canterbury region. It will be a further loss to the hundreds of other recreational users, including walkers, bird-watchers, photographers, etc, who usually greatly outnumber anglers on the lower reaches of Harts Creek.
18. I should say that I have also over the past 30 years fished the L2, the upper, middle, and lower reaches of the Selwyn River, the Hawkins River, the Hororata River, the Halswell River, and the Irwell Stream.
19. The Hawkins River, near Bluff Road at Sheffield was a favourite. I began fishing it in 1994 and fished it often for three or four years. Although it was a very small stream it was an excellent fishery, with large brown trout. The particular stretch that I visited repeatedly flowed continuously even in summer, although c. 2-3 km downstream the flows was often subterranean. The landowner who permitted me to cross his paddock assured me its continuous flow was due to feeder springs and that large numbers of fish are normally present. A few points of reference:
 - 19 Oct 1996; I saw about 25 fish, most 2-3 lbs and the largest c. 8-10 pounds in c. 1500 m of stream;
 - 26 Oct 1996; caught 3 fish, 1.5 to 4 lbs;

- 12 Nov 1996: visiting friend hooked and lost “largest brown trout of his life”, and estimated it to be 6 lbs in weight; I hooked and lost a fish that we both agreed was ten lbs.
 - 20 Feb. 1997... c. 20 fish seen; 3 fish caught
20. Sadly the fishing on this stretch of the Hawkins did not last. From memory, in 1998 the particular stretch of stream that I favoured was severely damaged by a bulldozer several hundred metres down the bed of the stream. I am afraid that soon after this event I lost heart and ceased my visits to this wonderful but obscure stream.
21. From an angler’s viewpoint it was another delightful Selwyn/Waihora tributary lost.
22. I have seen other Waihora tributaries and the associated angling opportunities decline over the past 30 years, albeit less abruptly than the Hawkins. But the end point for some (e.g. the Irwell River, which now runs dry nearly every summer) has been the same. Others survive, but in a much depleted state.
23. These streams have been very special places to me, to my children, to many other anglers, and to many more recreational users. I sincerely hope that this Commissioner Panel will find the will and the authority to reverse the decline in water quality and volume for the benefit of the many “in-stream” users of these rivers. streams and Te Waihora itself.
24. I thank you for the opportunity to address you and for your attention.

DATED this 16th day of September 2014

Allan Fife



