

A misspent youth on the riverbank

Dylan Roberts, head of fisheries at the GWCT, has been obsessed with salmon and sea trout since he was 12 years old. As a boy he bunked off school to fish the rivers he would one day dedicate his career to saving – and has spent three decades turning that obsession into science

My passionate relationship with salmon and sea trout started one Saturday morning: to be precise, 29 July 1981. I remember the date accurately because it was the very day that Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer got married. I was already a keen 12-year-old fisherman, venturing down to my local river armed with a bucket of worms and fishing rod. I grew up in south-west Wales on the banks of the lower river Teifi, where going fishing for us boys was almost mandatory. Mobile phones, iPads and the internet didn't exist in those days.

The river was just clearing after a spate and I had been fishing for 2-3 hours when a sharp tug on the end of my line suddenly exploded into a fish leaping into the air. Sea trout tend to do this; they are the most explosive of fish, yet famously enigmatic and by far my favourite fish to both study and catch. After a frantic five minutes, a 3lb sea trout was lying on the grass next to me. But what made this special was the fact that it was my very first sea trout - and I was well and truly hooked!

I wanted to show it off to my parents, so I ran home with my fish, passing three friends who were walking down to the Royal street party. "Hey Dylan, where are you going? The party is this way," they called. But my response was, "I don't care about the damn party; I've just caught a sewin. I'm going to show mum and then I'm going to catch another."

I didn't catch another. Not that day. But from that moment, I have enjoyed a lifelong passion for rivers,

salmon and sea trout. I spent the next 10 years spending every available hour on the river, catching hundreds of these fish. In the 80s, catching 200-300 sea trout and 30-40 salmon each season wasn't that difficult if you put the time in. These fish were so abundant that anglers used to kill most of what they caught, and sold them to local pubs and restaurants, as did I. If the river looked in good condition to catch, I was there, school day or not. I would pretend to go to school on the bus before doubling back to find my hidden bike, fishing tackle and old clothes. Thankfully, schools never bothered to phone home to ask where we were in those days, and you just had to forge a little letter.

When I was around 20 years old, my parents started to ask: "What are you going to do with your life? You can't spend your life fishing, shooting and working spaniels." I was quite resistant, enjoying my life on the river and in the field, until one day my mother sat me down and told me, "I have enrolled you on a Fisheries and Ocean Science course at the University of Plymouth!" So in September 1991, I was dumped in Plymouth and unceremoniously told "see you in four years when you have your degree".

Not being a natural academic, I did enjoy the subject which motivated me to put the hours in. Although it was a marine-focused course, I was given flexibility to direct my attention on course work and work placements around salmon and sea trout, because of course they spend a large part of their lives at sea.



Then as I was coming to the end of my degree and needed a dissertation, I worked on a placement for four months at the National Rivers Authority in Wales, gaining valuable experience in the basics of fisheries surveys and river quality assessment.

My lucky break came soon after. It was a very dark day for the seas and coastline around Wales, but as it transpired a very lucky day for me. It was 16 February 1996, when the oil tanker Sea Empress ran aground off Pembrokeshire, releasing 72,000 tons of crude oil into the sea. One of the concerns was the effect of the oil on the salmon and sea trout populations that would be swimming through the area on their way back to their natal rivers that spring and summer. They needed someone to lead a team to gather lots of data on fish, from the rivers and coastal nets. It was around March that year, when I got a call. "Dylan, are you interested in a job with the National Rivers Authority" or the newly formed Environment Agency Wales which was set up that year. I went for an interview in April, and started the day after finishing university.

I was very fortunate, in that I walked into a job I loved, working in my home rivers that I had fished, including the Teifi and working with salmon and sea trout. Then, in 1998 the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust GWCT (formerly the Game Conservancy Trust) were advertising for a project scientist to work on a salmon restoration project on the river Wye. The GWCT is quite a unique organisation and along with my passion for shooting and gundogs, it felt like home.

This year marks the 30th that I have been working in the salmon and sea trout research, conservation and management sector. It has been a bit of a journey, with many highs, working on exciting projects and with some great people. But I have also witnessed first-hand the steep decline in the numbers of Atlantic salmon and sea trout returning to our rivers. Pools that used to be alive with leaping sea trout on a summer's evening, are now deathly silent.

The Teifi which I grew up on is unrecognisable. The rod licence returns of 1988 show that anglers declared they had caught over 1,889 salmon which is estimated to be around 10-20% of the numbers of fish that ran