



SUSTAINABLE YELLOWFISHING



WADING THE RIVER : REDUCE YOUR IMPACT ON SPAWNING YELLOWFISH AND THE ECOSYSTEM

In the warmer months, the shallow rapids and riffles are home to a very rich ecosystem and food web on which yellowfish and other biota depend. Some obvious organisms being impacted by careless wading include:

- Aquatic plants
- Aquatic insects (caddisflies, mayflies, dragonflies, blackfly, midges etc) and crustaceans (shrimp, crab) living on the rocks and aquatic plants
- Fish species in the process of spawning such as smallmouth yellowfish (*Labeobarbus aeneus*), Orange Vaal mudfish (*Labeo capensis*) and catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*)
- Fish species permanently resident in the rapids such as the smaller catfish species and minnows
- Fish eggs maturing between the rocks and in the gravel



Yellowfish spawning in the Vaal

PIC: K. Wallington

This is certainly not an exhaustive list but it offers you, the angler, some insight into whose backyard you are trampling.

With the popularising of flyfishing for yellowfish, an army of yellowfish fanatics has been created. The good news is that almost all of these anglers are releasing their fish; the bad news is that a lot of them are targeting yellowfish in the rapids and riffles while the fish are spawning, as are anglers from other faculties. This results in the breeding stock of a school of fish being agitated and potentially killed during the critical spawning phase.

So what can one do to reduce impact on the fish and other members of the ecosystem?

The Yellowfishes of Southern Africa (*Labeobarbus spp.*) and the mudfishes will probably spawn when the river rises due to rain or because of artificial flow management that stimulates spawning through increased flow. These species spawn several times from late Spring to late Summer. When this

happens you will notice schools of fish holding in extremely shallow water (less than 30 centimetres sometimes) with their fins and sometimes bodies out of the water and will only spook when you are almost on top of them. They will rub themselves on the rocks and against each other and splash when they spawn.

So how can you limit your impact on the ecosystem in the rapids? A few basic steps follow:

- Please do not wade through spawning habitat or areas of fish activity, stay in water deeper than your knees.
- At spawning time be extra careful with the fish, fight them quickly, do not remove them from the water and make an effort to release them immediately.
- Use barbless hooks only.
- Spawning lasts for a few days and occurs on first rains or in mid spring (October normally), mid summer (normally December) and late rains or the latter half of summer (Feb/March). Spawning times can vary by up to a few weeks depending on where you are on the river so always be on the lookout.
- Respect spawning fish by avoiding them, not damaging spawning habitat (eggs are crushed by waders moving rocks against each other as you walk) and not casting at "spawners" Yes they are easy to catch but what's the challenge in that?! Politely enlighten other anglers if you suspect they may not be aware of the spawning or how to behave.

The Yellowfish Working Group has embarked on an awareness and educational programme to make anglers aware of the potential negative effects of wading on animals and plants that inhabit rivers. The Yellowfish Working Group applauds the efforts of Vaal River venues such as Eendekuil and Elgro River Lodge to set aside sections of the river which may not be waded during the spawning season.



SPAWNING AREA

PIC: D. WEAVER

BASIC FLYFISHING ETIQUETTE ON THE VAAL



*"The Beautiful Vaal" -
How much longer will it stay this way?*

PIC: S. Babich

1. **Do not enter the river immediately upstream of other anglers; this is extremely rude.** Most flyfishers will be wading slowly upstream and therefore climbing into the river immediately upstream is very bad manners. If you have to enter upstream of people do so at least 60 metres ahead and first request permission either by hand signal or your voice if shouting is not required.
2. **Give fellow anglers space.** Allow at least 2 line lengths (60 metres) between you and a fellow angler. If there are few anglers at the venue stay even further away. This will allow everyone the opportunity to target fish that have not been spooked or affected by fellow anglers. Do not crowd anglers who appear to be in a "hot spot" catching lots of fish. Most anglers will respond kindly to polite requests to understand what tactics they are employing so successfully. Ask what they are doing, do not wade over and start casting into the area the angler is fishing. Best to do this when the angler takes a break or makes eye contact.
3. **Boats:** If you do access the river with a boat please note that shore based anglers take preference over you. They cannot cover the same amount of water and are limited in their movement by deep, unwadeable water. Please float past them giving them a wide berth.
4. **All anglers are equal:** Respect and learn from fellow anglers, regardless of their chosen techniques and tackle. If they are behaving poorly towards fish, the environment or fellow anglers politely point this out to them.

Do not assume an arrogant attitude because you are a flyfisher. Flyfishers probably impact the river ecosystem more than other anglers, especially during spawning periods.

CATCH AND RELEASE OF YELLOWFISH

Catch and release of yellows has become an accepted practice amongst the flyfishing fraternity. This has ensured that despite heavy fishing pressure sufficient adult fish of breeding age are released to maintain a healthy population. However, a few basic rules apply to Catch & Release.

1. Use only barbless or de-barbed hooks.
2. Do not play fish to exhaustion. Use side strain to get the fish out of the flowing water to bring it in as quickly as possible. This also lessens the chance of losing it.
3. Try and unhook the fish without removing it from the water. If you use a net do not remove it to weigh and measure it. Rather use a net with a scale on the handle and place a tape or measurements on your rod to record the length.
4. Never hold it with dry hands.
5. Hold it firmly but gently and do not squeeze it.
6. If the fish is exhausted hold it upright in well-oxygenated water pointing upstream until it has recovered. If necessary push it forwards but not backwards and forwards.
7. If you use a net make sure the netting is a soft, knotless and not abrasive, synthetic material, which removes the protective slime.
8. All fish stress during capture and this is particularly marked in polluted, warm water with low levels of dissolved oxygen. Limit the number of fish you catch especially when they are prone to stress.

POLLUTION OF THE VAAL: A HUGE PROBLEM

Pollution is a major problem in South Africa and the Vaal itself has been particularly badly affected. In fact pollution is by far the most important threat to what is still a world-class fly fishing resource. Unfortunately, with each year that passes this threat increases with the main culprits being malfunctioning and overflowing sewage plants. These are mainly in the Gauteng area but many other municipal water treatment plants in the catchment area contribute to this scourge. Other major pollution threats come from the heavy metals and acid mine drainage from the mining industry while many other industries and farming operations must take a share of the blame.

If you have evidence of this please contact the following Department of Water Affairs offices:

- Above the Barrage: Gauteng office at 012-3921306 & 392-1300
- Barrage to Bloemhof Dam: Bloemfontein office at 051-4059000
- Downstream of Bloemhof Dam: Kimberley office at 053-8308800

You should also contact your local conservation office or conservancy if you see fish with cuts, abrasions or sores.

Lastly, kindly develop a sense of responsibility towards the river. If there is the litter which is washed into the river or which irresponsible anglers and picnickers leave on the riverbank, pick it up on the way back to your car.

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www.fishingowl.co.za