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Oystein Aas [00:00:10] I started fishing at a quite young age, probably around 8, 10 years. Probably a bit earlier.

Oystein Aas [00:00:21] The interesting thing is that there was no one in my family who really fished. There was more distant relatives and some friends of my mother and father fished. But but no one in the near family fished. I'm not really sure how, but I very early on catched a interest in fishing and I hooked up with some of these more distant people and they immediately sort of got hooked by fishing. I grew up in this area here just outside outside Oslo with not very much trout and salmon. So it was mostly pike and perch and things like that. But I decided very early on to proceed my fishing into salmon fishing. And I read a lot about it. And on a family camping trip up north in Norway, I decided I'd done sort of probably agreed with my parents that I had to try to fish some salmon.

Oystein Aas [00:01:32] And the very first night they fished for salmon in their rather famous river in Norway, actually I got 20, 20 pound salmon immediately on a spoon and that probably influenced a lot of what I've done later in life, career wise, and also what I prioritize to do in my in my free time.

Oystein Aas [00:02:03] I am. My master's education is from the University of Life Sciences in Norway. And that's sort of a study in applied Fish and Wildlife Management. It's sort of an ecology light oriented. Has a sort of profession, profession, profession orientation. Practical orientation. Educating people to go into agencies. Bureaucracy. So I took that master degree by partly by incident. I got a research job dealing with it, will set up a new program on outdoor recreation research in Norway. And I got this sort of a junior job there. I developed quickly into that. And took a PhD in social sciences and my PhD is on different aspects of human dimensions of recreational fishing. So I worked a lot with angler attitudes, angler motivations. Quite influenced by American research in that direction. Worked quite a lot with some American researchers, especially early in my career in the 1990s. Lately more in the European context. But yeah, and I work a lot with, for instance, angler attitudes to harvest regulations. What tests cost to the development of catch and release angling in Europe and Scandinavia, which were, especially Scandinavia, were relatively late to pick up on that type of behavior. So I also work, today I don't work so much with recreational fisheries these days. I work with other topics within environmental conservation and nature conservation, but mostly on the social science side.

Oystein Aas [00:04:29] Well. I think, first of all, researching to angler motivation shows that anglers fish for a variety of reasons. Harvest or catch or catch is not the same as harvest. So different aspects of catch motives varies between cultures and between countries. And that's what some of the things I did in my PhD I looked how consumptive orientation, which is a sort of a concept coined by, he's actually dead now, but a very influential American scientist, worked out of Texas. His name was Bob Deaton, Robert Deaton. He coined this concept of of consumptive orientation. And we studied that in Scandinavia and found it to be more pronounced here than in the US, for instance, in the early 1990s. What we have seen here is that especially in trout and salmon fishing, catch and release has become quickly a very, very profound behavior. And what I but some of my later papers have studied, we have looked into how social norms, together with regulations formal regulations, really, really pushes this behavior really, really strongly. Because catch and release among peers, among other anglers are so strongly promoted and being also. Yeah, you are you are true all kinds of informal processes. You are getting credit for releasing a fish instead of, killing it. If you kill a fish in certain circles, you are

punished. You are yelled at especially on social media and all these kinds of things. So I think this is very important to understand.

Oystein Aas [00:06:47] We have seen the same in like in Scotland, in Scotland, the Scottish Salmon Fisheries, Scotland, salmon fisheries went from zero catch and release to almost 100 catch and, 100 percent catch and release in just two years in the mid-1990s. The same has happened here during the last five years, and many rivers have gone from hardly any catch and release at all to almost all catch and release. Brown trout, dry fly fisheries. Yeah, the attractive Norwegian Scandinavian rivers have gone from hardly any catch and release to almost completely catch and release also. Within the last 10 10 years probably.

James Thull [00:07:32] And has it had an effect on the fish?

Oystein Aas [00:07:34] Oh yeah. I think most people would agree on that. I mean, I'm personally or no, probably more sort of scientifically, I don't think catch and release solution to the major challenges for cold water fisheries. I think it's a very minor thing compared to climate change, habitat loss and these major issues, which really concerns me. But I think definitely catch and release plays an important role in especially in providing anglers with the experiences they, they are chasing.

Oystein Aas [00:08:21] Well, yeah, I think that that really disturbs me deeply. It's also difficult to say what's going to happen, how policy can change probably or hopefully very quickly when the ball just starts rolling and hopefully and maybe see some of those early really dramatic steps in that direction. But yes, both. Yeah, habitat loss and climate change really worries me. On the social side, there's all these sort of discussions about people leaving consumptive sports to use that term because some sort of urbanization.

Oystein Aas [00:09:22] We also have this debate about whether angling is ethical in Europe. Also, if kill angling is more ethical than catch and release angling, which is very interesting.

Oystein Aas [00:09:35] I even wrote a paper comparing the arguments for and against catch and release in American and European papers, which shows that people in favor of catch and release and people against catch and release both use sort of the same. They both mean it's ethical practice. Which is maybe a bit funny or paradoxical, but but really not in my opinion, I think. I think both both ways of reasoning are possible to understand. So but.

Oystein Aas [00:10:29] But yes, definitely I I'm more worried about what we as humans are doing to nature than what how humans are eventually changing from urbanisation, globalization, living more distant from nature, and that this will be sort of the end of all kinds of sort of consumptive sports, blood sports, whether it's hunting or fishing. But I'm living in Scandinavia now, of course. And generally there's sort of the general population support for hunting and fishing is very, very high here, probably quite similar to rural western North America. But they have a very, very high percentage of recreational fishers in Norway in general. Almost half the population say they fish. We know they exaggerate. So it's probably more like one fourth. But it's still it's very, very high.

Oystein Aas [00:11:44] To start on the I'm I'm most of my fishing, center on Atlantic salmon fishing and I fish, yeah, different countries and different parts of Norway. As we all know, Atlantic, Atlantic salmon is going back very much. And yeah, the scientists are

talking about populat- the total population of salmon is less than half of what was just a couple of decades back. And it's especially in the southern area. So it's distribution, regional distribution it's where it's most affected. But I mean, this is sort of almost like cursing in the church. But I think as a salmon fisherman, I really, really had some good years as a salmon fisherman the last decade last 10 years. And that's partly because I've gone to places where there still are quite a lot of salmon. And I think we see some actually also in the sub Arctic areas of Norway, Russia, partly Iceland. We see some of these paradoxical positive effects of global warming because the salmon who lives up in the Arctic area, they have really probably had really, really good feeding conditions in the in the Barents Sea up towards Svalbard, Spitzbergen these northern areas. So it's kind of sad in a way. But also in Norway, we changed the management of salmon completely. In the around 2008, 2009, we we went to a more empirical based spawning stock targets, which reduced fishing quite a lot, both in river fishing, but also we still have some salmon netting in Norway on the coast and that was cut down quite considerable considerably, and that has strengthened river angling actually in many areas of Norway. We also have some of these brighter and common lights. And we have done some really successful restoration projects for salmon in Norway. We have a lot of the rivers on the south coast of Norway, which itself where we are now which was heavily affected by acid rain. And that's started already almost 100 years ago with industrial pollution from the UK and Germany, primarily. Partly because of better cleaning of sulfur deposits at these big factories and partly because of new liming technology, these rivers where are now limed and the salmon have been restored in those rivers. Either they had some small remaining populations or salmon from nearby rivers invaded them. So that part of Norway didn't have salmon fishing for 60, 70, 80 years, and suddenly nowadays they are really, really good. Another big problem in Norway has been the introduction of a parasite from the Baltic region called Gyrodactylus. And we have also conducted some really, really, really successful but expensive restoration programs there. They're about to get rid of that parasite completely after it affected more than 40 rivers in Norway. And some of them were among the best and most famous rivers in Norway. One opened last year and I was lucky to, to fish it some of the first days and it was like a miracle. It was crazy. It was so many salmon, it was just like a miracle. So there is sort of this very mixed picture. But of course, the overall trend is that the salmon goes back. But I think salmon angling in Norway is quite good at the moment, despite these these changes and that is partly because the management makes sure that more salmon reach the river, rivers. Yeah, but then you have these sort of megatrends with climate change and habitat loss. This conflict between biodiversity and climate is also really problematic.

Oystein Aas [00:17:10] And in Norway, which is a big country in hydropower, the politicians in Norway said 20 years ago that the era for big hydropower project in Norway were over.

Oystein Aas [00:17:25] But that is something that is not as as as true as it was 20 years ago because of the big push for renewable energy. So the hydropower industry, which is really strong in Norway, they now sort of push that we have a lot of protect, a lot of the rivers in Norway that are not developed for hydropower purposes. They are protected by parliamentary decisions. And the hydropower industry now tries to sort of push on that with the climate as as the main argue. So on the social side, I think or I know actually from statistics that when I started salmon fishing in the early 1980s, there were more salmon fishers in Norway. There were more crowding on the rivers. There are more sort of, yeah, than it is these days. So, yeah, you don't know how well, you know, but in Norway, the fishing is privately owned.

Oystein Aas [00:18:38] But we have some sort of common lands, salmon fishing, especially up north. You get more of the situation like you have in North America there with people queuing up on the good pool. So there is a lot of inter-angler conflicts between spoon and worm anglers and harvest oriented anglers or. Anglers who are fly fishing more prone to release their fish and so on. But I think generally that this sort of pressure on the rivers are, it's definitely not bigger than it was 30, 40 years ago, actually. And so so but there's still quite a lot of salmon fishers in Norway. So. And it's still quite popular here. So.

Oystein Aas [00:19:42] Well, I could, of course, like to go to Canada. I've fished steelhead in Canada in B.C. and I tend to do tried to do that every second or every third year.

Oystein Aas [00:19:54] But I've never fished the east coast of Canada for Atlantic salmon and to fish these sort of crystal clear, clear, dry fly rivers in the Gaspé area, for instance, is something I really, really would like to do. But I guess that's an area where salmon is really under pressure, especially the southern parts of Canada and sort of one of the really, really big rivers in the world for Atlantic Salmon, The Miramichi. Now, I just read about it that you have this crazy story with the striped bass invading the lower parts, at least the Miramichi and just preying on at least small salmon. Yeah, it's and of course that probably also something that this caused by climate change and warmer oceans and these striped bass stocks moving farther and farther north on the east coast of North America. So so there's all kinds of effects here. So.

Oystein Aas [00:21:00] Of course, I think a lot about that also. Yeah, and I tend to say maybe I'd start to relax a little bit more now, but when I'm a very impatient person and people who don't know about angling or salmon or anything, they say to me, Oh, you fish. You must be patient. I say, hell no, I'm not patient at all. And that makes me a very good angler. They sort of laugh at me, but. Well, for me, of course yeah, I think I like the sort of the physical part of fishing a lot. Of course I relax mentally. But that is not because I sort of sit down and listen to the water or the birds or anything. It's because I'm so focused.

Oystein Aas [00:22:06] But of course, I like to be in the wild rivers. That's a very, very important thing for me. And on clean rivers, of course, I probably yeah, I I tend to admit that I also recognize and value the sort of the more competitive aspects of angling. It's a big challenge. It's it's to catch a salmon, I mean it's a it's a fish where you sometimes you might be happy if you catch one fish in a week.

Oystein Aas [00:22:43] But I mean at least as long as they don't talk about grilles, what we call these sort of one sea-meter to fish normally between four or five pounds as long as they don't talk about them. I mean, every salmon is a trophy fish. Some I mean, some I've fished a lot in Iceland with very high catch rates. And maybe you should at least have one fish per day. I mean, on some of the big rivers in Norway yeah one, two, three fish per week is what you can expect. And sometimes that means that zero is also a very, very possible outcome. So it's a lot of hard work. It's a lot of commitment. It's also on the bigger Norwegian Rivers there is you really need to cast a long line. You need to wade, you need to be able to fish long hours. So all these sort of yeah, this challenge part maybe I that's also something I learned in Canada from fish to there's a wild rivers on the schema system and sort of more expedition style fishing.

Oystein Aas [00:23:59] We have applied that partly also in northern Norway, where there is a lot of roadless, roadless rivers and you can go on these quite long hikes into the mountains and follow the rivers. There is not much elevation up there so the salmon tend to go quite far in. And you can find actually stretches of these rivers, especially late in

season where it's hardly any, any other anglers. And these are public rivers. So these are some of the things that I really like. So I'm not much of a I'm not fishing to seek relaxation or or comfort or luxury much. I've been to some really, really nice launches both in Russia and Iceland too. But I mean, that's just something you have to do sometimes to pay for just to get on, on some of these good rivers.

Oystein Aas [00:25:03] Well, I I read a lot about fishing, I even write some about fishing myself, not as a researcher, but that's a sort of a writer. I like a lot of older Scandinavian books. I mean, the hey years of book publishing was probably between 1960 and 1980 probably. And we have I have a few favorite authors from Scandinavia from that period of time who also wrote about salmon fishing, especially in the northern part of Scandinavia, and I really like to read those books. A Swede called Hans Lidman who was really praised for his sort of poetic tone in his writings. He's not translated into English, as far as I know, some Norwegian authors from the same period. Many of these people really gave up many, many books, you know, you had.

Oystein Aas [00:26:16] Yeah. So but I also have read a lot of American books. I like I like a lot his book The Longest Silence by what's his name? Tom McGuane. I really like that one. I read the British salmon angling books, of course.

Oystein Aas [00:26:41] And I think I'm I think I'm a proponent of the way modern salmon fly fishing is developed in Scandinavia, sort of bridging both British and I mean, British salmon fishing dominated completely what was done in Scandinavia until 1980, probably. Rods, flies, techniques, everything. I mean and Brits, they hired all the rivers in Norway until, yeah. And, there are very few Americans here, not very many. But in some rivers there were Americans. On sort of like the Alta where they fish a lot from boats, there were many Americans and they fished for these really, really big Alta salmon with quite light tackle mostly because they have very good boatmen that they can pull up the big salmon with boats.

Oystein Aas [00:27:45] So they use singlehanded sort of rods, maybe Typhoon rods and stuff like that quite early on. But except for that, there was heavy, long rods, you know, and the very stereotypic British fishing, not very, very, very traditional. And I think in the early eighties when I came into salmon fishing, you had a lot of new tackle coming in, especially like carbon fiber rods. And it took, took a few years before they started to make really good double handed spay rods in in the graphite. But, you know, like Sage and Gary Loomis and some of these companies came in and cooperated with people in Scandinavia to sort of really take the sport forward. And also bringing in a lot of American style flies, techniques and stuff like that.

Oystein Aas [00:28:47] Just one example is this issue or this technique of fishing.

Oystein Aas [00:28:51] Salmon with dry flies, dry flies that drift, dry flies that has really taken off completely in northern Norway now, and it's a very, very efficient technique there. But it's just recently, maybe the last five years. And now you can see a local fisher carrying a single handed rod with a classic bumper fly on. And in one hand and the double handed rod with a big tube fly in the other hand.

Oystein Aas [00:29:24] And that's something he's very comfortable with doing. He has experienced the effectiveness of fishing, the dry flies. So so this I think I think that this from sort of a tackle technique point of view. I think it has been really interesting to see how globalization and especially the connection between the Steelhead culture in North

America and the salmon culture, especially in Scandinavia, has exchanged ideas some flies on the rods, on lines and on techniques.

Oystein Aas [00:30:17] That's really, really interesting and I see a lot of mutual learning across those two cultures.

Oystein Aas [00:30:26] So that's that's really interesting. Well, I mean, maybe not. I could probably come up with quite a few. Yeah.

Oystein Aas [00:30:44] Maybe. A serious one is this experience last year with this river Vefsna, which reopened after 40 years without salmon because of this parasite. Then I was able to fish the opening day in one of the better pools on that river and that was expected to be quite good. We went there for some days and then we we have plans to go farther north to the rivers we normally fish. We changed our plans and went back to that river just because we hope the fishing would be quite good again. We came back three weeks later than the first trip and the first half hour, my friend and I caught two salmon each. It was just. It was just, yeah, it was just like a miracle, you know, and in this sort of grim world and all these challenges, I mean, to also see and appreciate the sort of steps that goes in the right direction, it's such a sort of. It's really good to to be able to experience that, too. And also, you have to keep some optimism and also see what good can be, can be done, because it's not sort of Armageddon. It's it's it's something that we as humans really has the power, we have the possibility to solve this issues if we if we just decide to do it. So. Yeah, so so I'm I'm I'm I'm really scared, but I'm also optimistic. So.