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Andrew Fowler [00:00:10] Yeah, I guess so. I think for me, fishing is, is an escape. I'm very non-competitive. I like my own company, or the company of few people. I like to be out in the hills. Fly fishing gives me an excuse to spend seven, eight, nine hours spending time in nature, looking at small things under rocks and on grass that even a hiker wouldn't pick up because he's moving through the landscape, whereas I'm spending time in it for a prolonged period of time. And for me, like many others, it's participating in nature and enjoying bird life and insect life, and experiencing the flow of a river. And then the fishing is just a means to an end in a sense. Yeah.

Andrew Fowler [00:01:00] Yeah, difficult to say. You know, my grandfather fly fished. I grew up on a small farm, and there were fly rods hanging in the hallway. So it was kind of a, and there were some books on the bookshelf. So I was exposed to it a little bit, but my father didn't fish. I had an uncle and a cousin who were mad keen, and I guess that helped me get into it. And strangely enough I was at boarding school, sort of 30, 40 miles from, from home, the home farm. And it was at boarding school that I picked up a [unintelligible] beginner's fly tying guide. And the first thing I ever did was tie a fly, not actually fish. So for me that's how it started and it just grabbed me. And that was junior school, so I was, I don't know, 12 years old or something, and I've been addicted to fly fishing ever since.

Andrew Fowler [00:01:52] Yeah. A lot of people ask me that. I haven't used a store-bought fly in 30 years, so to me I don't, I don't think about it anymore. All my flies are tied by me. But, but yeah, I guess if I stop and think about it, it is special.

Andrew Fowler [00:02:13] Yeah, I don't kind of follow a particular fly tyer. I guess it's more a case of, of seeing patterns which I particularly enjoy for various reasons. [Unintelligible] caddis, for example, floats particularly well. Bounces off the grass on a bouncy spot on, a very crowded stream so it doesn't hook up. So I'll choose that fly and not necessarily focus on who the guy was who invented it. But I like the aspects of its design. So, other examples; a lot of us South Africans are keyed into the para RAB. Which is basically a parachute fly with a, a broad halo heckle that gives it flotation on a rough stream. We fish those a lot. Probably found that in your other interviews. Yeah, I've got, I enjoy my books. I got a lot of books, some of them are old books, so there are a lot of patterns out of Randall Kaufmann's book, I guess, if I think about it, that I that I use. Like his floating dragon, on a still waters. Yeah but small delicate dries and emergers, where I can. And when they're not working, well then I'll go a nymph.

Andrew Fowler [00:03:26] I love my literature. I really love it. Harry. A battle to sort of pin it down to a list of three, or something. But Harry Middleton sticks out for me. Ted Leeson, John Geirach, Tom Sutcliffe-- South African author. Wow, Neil Paterson, a British writer. Quirky, offbeat and unusual, I enjoy that. Yeah. So many, so many good titles. Little bit of stuff on the fringes of fly fishing. So there's some stuff by Greek, French, and Tasmanian. Lot of conservation related issues with just a touch of fly fishing. And non-fly fishing related, Aldo Leopold. A Sand County Almanac, what a wonderful book.

James Thull [00:04:10] Yeah.

[00:04:12] So I'll read stuff that's sort of on the periphery of fly fishing, as well, you know. It's a broader thing. But yeah. Middleton. Leeson. Geirach. Sutcliffe. Yeah. Those are some big ones.

Andrew Fowler [00:04:29] Well this is very close to my heart. I've, I've got a whole lot of conservation involvement, if I can call it that. In this country, I get a sense that we have a lot of heat. And so we, there are very limited ranges of trout in South Africa. If we start looking at a map, they're just little slivers. And so I have a deep sense that, they're are such small areas, it's so limited, that there's a lot of reason to preserve it. We can't just move on to the next watershed, or next drainage because that's too low or too muddy. So we have very limited areas. And if we don't look after those, they'll be gone in a flash. You know unlike North America, we don't have vast expanses of land with temperatures that suit trout. So for me, I think our biggest threat is erosion and siltation. Probably our biggest threat. From a combination of overgrazing and unregulated forestry. To some degree, water obstruction. But I think the other two are more significant. And for me, on this continent, although trout are not native to here, they are like a canary in the coal mine. In that, if you no longer have a population of trout in a river, you should be worried as to why is that the case. What has gone wrong? Because it's signaling to you a bigger problem. It's signaling to you, heating of the water, lower flows, more siltation, or some sort of pollution, or excessive extraction. So yeah, the trout are an indicator. And the fact that they have a tenuous existence here makes them a very refined indicator. If I can call it that. So I've been very involved in projects in my home province of KZN. On the Umgeni River, in particular. A river that's had Brown Trout in it for 127 years now. And was once a hallowed fly fishing destination, mentioned on the back pages of the 1920s and 1930s Hardy's catalogues, as a destination. People would stay in the Dargle Hotel and take some sort of a horse buggy and go and fish so, it has a long history. And in those days it would have been a pristine environment of natural grassland, veldt, as we call it. And over the years, those regulated timber forestry, as well as the spread of alien species from those, has created degradation and siltation. And so we've been involved in projects on the Umgeni to try and rectify it.

Andrew Fowler [00:07:10] Yeah, ok. I'm currently and recently the chairman of that club. But I've been a member of the club since the mid-'80s. We are based in the city of Pietermaritzburg, that's our sort of hometown, although most of our waters are inland of that, at a slightly higher altitude. We have about 450 members. And we are largely a trout fly fishing organisation, although we do have some yellowfish and some bass waters. And the project on the Umgeni we've coined the B.R.U. hashtag B.R.U Blue Ribbon Umgeni. Taking from that American concept of the blue ribbon trout stream, which I'm familiar with. And we started that in 2013, with a minor raffle fundraiser. I think we raised 1500 rand. I mean that's like 150 US dollars. And that's just grown. And that's very much a personal passion of mine, but I couldn't have done it without the support of people in our club, and I've sort of imposed it upon the club but they've taken that and run with it, made it bigger than I ever could have on my own. We, we've worked for about three years. Starting with very light work, and as we've progressed up this particular stretch of river, finding stretches of river that were very infested with *Acacia Mearnsii*, or the Wattle Tree. And we've done some very heavy work on about four and a half kilometres of stream. My colleagues got together and did a fundraiser, just last month. And we, in one evening, with donated items that we auctioned, we raised 230,000 rand, which we are delighted with. We're thrilled. We now have a war chest and we're about to embark on further clearing, and getting that river back to what it used to be, it's exciting. You can drive over the hill and look at the river valley and it's already transformed, so it's very satisfying work. And there's been great camaraderie. Most of it's been done with paid contractors, but with volunteers working side by side, and guys have worked til they've got blisters on their hands. So it's real feel good stuff.

Andrew Fowler [00:09:19] I think it has to happen naturally. One can't force it on anyone. It's a topic that has been discussed a lot recently, because we are a majority black country. And if you go to any of the events, like today's, you barely see a black face. And we're very racially conscious in South Africa, perhaps too much so. I'm of the opinion that you can't take someone who is perhaps poverty stricken, and try and turn them into a fly fisherman for the sake of your, your political showcase. So I'm of the view that as fly fishers, we, we can contribute to communities by doing limited commercialization of their fisheries. To put some money into the community. And for me, that's the first step. So if you, if you go up a river valley like say the Bushmens River, you have a community who lives there. Who don't fully appreciate, they don't have the education to understand why their litter should not make its way into the river. We as fly fishers want a clean river. So we're of a mind to to approach those communities and rent their water... And then use it. If they see us fly fishing and they show an interest, well then we should deeply embrace that. But I think we should start with community funding for perhaps their soccer which is the football, which is close to their heart. Or painting of their school, or fencing of their garden to keep the animals out. Or something basic like that, and let the fly fishing come naturally, rather than trying to impose it. And be quite pragmatic about, about it, rather than any showcase.

Andrew Fowler [00:10:59] I think it's very important for someone to, to take that up. I personally am one who gets frustrated preparing papers, sitting in meetings, strategizing. I like to get out there and cut down an invasive tree or put a [unintelligible] and do that work. But I value, I value the work of those who, who feel that, that's their field of commitment. And I realize that legislation and the policies of government are important. I would imagine they are more important in a first world country. I say that because, in this country the crying need for input, for policies, for funding is for more basic needs. For education, for job security, for food, for well-being. And that's going to come before the environment, unfortunately that's the reality. So we have, I think fairly sophisticated environmental legislation here. But there is zero policing or implementation. So I think good environmental practice is going to come from the hearts of people, not from legislation in this country, given our circumstances and the degree of poverty and unemployment. I would no doubt see it differently in a first world country like in North America.

Andrew Fowler [00:12:24] I do. I'm conflicted. We have some streams where I can go and fly fish in the mountains in a beautiful environment that has no degradation whatsoever. That's pristine, and I can truly relax. That would be the upper Bushman's River, the Mooi River, they really are fantastic. But I keep feeling my heart strings pull back to the Umgeni River, which I mentioned early, earlier, because I just, it's considered as a second rate stream and I am one drawn to the underdog, and making it better. But when I'm there I'm looking at the, the erosion and the timber, and I'm not relaxing quite as much as I am when I'm up in the mountains on the pristine stream.

Andrew Fowler [00:13:13] I haven't travelled and fished outside of South Africa. And I would love to do that. But right now, my state of mind, I would want to use that money to fish right where I am, and showcase it, and show other guys what we've got. And my selfish enjoyment of fishing in the places like Patagonia, and I'll mention it because I'd love to go to Patagonia or New Zealand, that would come secondary. I have a passion for saying to guys, 'come and see what we've got here.' I read Geirach, about catching 10, 11, 12 inch fish in the mountains of Colorado. We do that every week here in South Africa. And yet we're, we're a niche destination. We're not considered a trout fishing destination. It would give me great satisfaction to see us become a destination.

Andrew Fowler [00:14:05] I try to encourage people to enjoy our streams. But a beginner is probably better off starting on one of our still waters, because they're just less, there are less issues to manage, in terms of a fly line moving at you quicker than you're, you're ready for. So we start people out on on still waters. And try and take them somewhere where there's fish, so they can feel that tug on the end of the line because once they felt that, they're in, they've hooked themselves more so than the fish. But overall, yeah, encourage the youth as much as possible. Because we don't have a lot of young entrants to the sport. And it concerns us. And we probably need to get into the schools more and get alongside youngsters. And teach, teach them to enjoy the outdoors. And try and build that grassroots passion for being out in the countryside. I think if we could just get that instilled in the hearts of youngsters, we will have conservationists and we will have fly fisherman.

Andrew Fowler [00:15:10] I think I would say that I'm definitely not a technical author or a technical fisherman. I'm a nostalgic person. I enjoy stories, and nuances, and experiences. And so my writing is about that. I like to throw in lines with second meanings or deeper meanings. And I like to find a story that, with within it is a thinly veiled thread with a message. Whether it be, the value of relaxing from work, whether it be an environmental message in a story. I'm definitely inspired by the writings of others, in terms of the way in which they bring a deeper meaning into a story and I try not to emulate or copy any particular author. But yeah I personally fall asleep with a technical book. Much as I enjoy it, it falls in my face at night. But a story I get captivated with. And so that's what grabs me from a reading point of view. So I try to and do that in my writing. And I enjoy my writing. It's an outlet for me.

Andrew Fowler [00:16:21] No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I think there are a lot of anglers a lot better than me. I think the other way around is that, as an angler, I mull over a day's fishing that I've just had, or perhaps while I'm fishing, and I build the story in my mind. And in that way I get to relive my days fishing more times than once.

Andrew Fowler [00:16:47] That's a, that's a big, broad question. I guess, for me, I think we seem to have less people who read, and who refer back to previous manuscripts and books and what have you. Just to encourage people to go back to those, and use those as a benchmark. I've used a little book called Trout Fishing in Natal, written in the 1960s, as a benchmark to, to see the descriptions of our waters and how they were then, to evaluate how they're doing now. And if 100 years from now, someone's using that book or my book or any other writing, to, to gauge how we've done and whether we're slipping or gaining, I think they would be valuable.