

rangeleywilson-charles-2018-10-06.mp4

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:00:10] Pretty much. I was just instinctively interested you know when I was quite young. I just wanted to go fishing. My father had had fished a bit in Africa. But he wasn't really a fisherman so I don't think anyone really introduced me. I was pretty much self-taught. I grew up in southwest London. So there wasn't much opportunity to go fishing around where I lived. The Thames had nothing in it back then. This is the 1960s 70s. I used to fish little ponds and stuff and catch sticklebacks, the kind of things that little boys do you know in jam jars. And that kind of thing and mucked about really for a long for for a few years. Fishing got serious for me when I my godmother bought a house in Ireland in Kerry. On the west coast of Ireland. And during my teenage summers her son Simon was very very good friend of mine and I used to go there every summer. And that's where fishing kind of got serious. But I know that I was interested in it beforehand because I've got books from that time and I used to write letters home talking about you know this and that little pond school where no one ever caught anything. But when I went to Kerry you know we we got. You know I encountered trout rivers for the first time really. And learned to fish for trout and with a worm. That was my first and then. My first trout was probably when I was 12 13 14 years old that's at the time.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:01:47] Well I've done a lot of international fishing because from uh well I went to art school. And I was an art teacher for about 10 years and then I stopped teaching art and kind of went became a freelance writer River keeper and so on and I started writing for magazines and so a lot of the time I was travelling to write a kind of travel essay on fishing and overseas destinations. Particularly in a magazine called The Field. But I've also stuff for Gray's Sporting Journal. I think Fly Rod and Reel one or two articles many years ago. So yes I've done a lot of fishing in all sorts of parts of the world but I was born in Zambia and my father's family from Africa. So I've been back to South Africa. A few times. And one of the first travel features I wrote for The Field actually was was fishing in the Drakensburg mountains. In South Africa. Which was just amazing. Beautiful beautiful part of the world.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:02:50] Absolutely. Yeah. I mean I do enjoy I have to confess catching non-native fish in New Zealand and South Africa and places like that but yeah when I came over and I actually landed and went to Jackson about a week ago. It was cutthroats I really wanted to catch and in fact all around Jackson that's all I caught. Which was just huge huge thrill the first day I was on my own and I went to a spring creek just on the outskirts of Jackson called Flat Creek. I didn't really know what to make of it to start there seemed to be more anglers than fish. There was very little going on. I lost my fly rod on the river bank. I traipsed up and down trying to find it. And then everyone migrated away from the river and I was pretty much on my own as sort of as the dark came on and suddenly this river that had been pretty much empty of fish all day long. I started to see the odd rising fish while I was trying to find my fly rod. I caught four cutthroats in Flat Creek one of which was just a monster. And that was a real thrill. So yeah it's always a thrill to catch the fish. That kind of belong in a place. Yeah and I've written I've written a bit about that and I've written a bit about been very interested in the history of trout transportation round the world that began in the 1860s. When a guy called James Yule was trying to take salmon to Tasmania. Not not ostensibly as a sporting fish more as a kind of more as a kind of uh you know utilitarian thing sort of in terms of like feeding people. I think it was. But there was there was an element where people were looking at this amazing River in Tasmania again there's no salmon in it isn't that a shame, they weren't trying to take take trout there at all. It was just salmon they were focused on. And it took many many years because it was almost impossible to get these cold water fish across the equator. But

James Yule worked it out in the end. He was a very practical Australian farmer. And uh the trout went in as a sort of afterthought in the shipment and of course they were the only fish that took because the salmon once they were released into the into the wilds of the Southern Hemisphere. They hadn't a clue where they were. So I mean they must've gone to sea and disappeared. And it was the trout that kind of stuck. So I've been really really interested, so that was the start of my interest, because those fish came from a little chalk stream which I know really well just near London called the the The Wye flows, it's pretty much an urban river now and two other chalk streams The Way and the Itchen and those are all rivers I know really well. So I became really interested in this idea that, you know, these trout were taken out of their native environment to a non-native environment. And then the native environment they came from became degraded over the next hundred and fifty years. And and now the catch did not only degraded but also stopped with farmed fish. So now you can go to Tasmania and catch a pure strain, [the] River Wye chalk stream trout. Sort of almost genetically perfect. You go to that river and well who knows what's there.

James Thull [00:06:00] I have seen that in other places around the world too, where the fish that have been stocked are more remote and more genetically pure than than the ones that were in the original stocking river or body of water.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:06:13] So we both know South Africa and there's a there's a river there called the I think it's called the Wildebeest, it's near Maclear, I think I'm right in remembering that. And there was a farmer on that river who got delivered some rainbow trout eggs by accident. He hadn't a clue what to do with them and so he got some oil barrels, he must be a very practical guy because he got some old oil barrel barrels filled them with gravel. Put the eggs in the gravel stabbed a load of holes in the side of the barrel and then just dropped them in the river. And that was in 1890 ish. Those those rainbow trout were directly from California.

James Thull [00:06:54] McCloud? Or?

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:06:54] Yeah I don't what I mean I don't know what river they used but and they've been in that river now in South Africa ever since. So they are you know they're your absolutely pure strain you know. West Coast Rockies rainbows. That have been breeding and thriving in that South African river for a hundred and forty years absolutely untouched. And no one's really messed with the gene pool at all. That's why I find those those sorts of stories are just really interesting throw up all sorts of. All sorts of. Interesting ideas and issues.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:07:22] Well it's a fraught issue I think. To a certain extent. I think it's very difficult to turn back the clock and it's arbitrary how you do. So this is one of the first issues with this sort of idea that you know you might want to return some of those habitats to um a sort of pristine sort of endemic state. I think those that are still in that state should be very very carefully guarded. Because you know there aren't that many waters say in Tasmania where you've only got Galaxias which is their native trout, native fish and you haven't got trout. So it is a really good case for really looking after the places that haven't been sort of spoilt by the non-native species. But if if the if the place has been, well how do you turn back the clock? I mean there's so much stuff was taken over to Australia just an example that I know a bit more about. The sort of you know in terms of the Southern Hemisphere you know we took earthworms, we took wasps, we took magpies, we took goats, pheasants, briar roses, you know all sorts of species of birds and plants. So how do you start unpicking all of that. It's very difficult I think. And then the other

part of it. Which is that you know I think about a lot is that you know certain certain of those species give that landscape quite a lot of value to the people. So in terms of salmonids, in terms of trout, it's a large motivation to look after a given piece of habitat. So where that way or on the fault line where you say got agricultural interests starting to come in and say the Mackenzie Plain in New Zealand is a really good example of where you've got high desert and a lot of pressure to turn that high desert into really fertile dairy land. Massive irrigation schemes that are having big impacts on the rivers, rivers that come out of the mountains full of water and never reach the sea because there's so much irrigation going on. Okay so there you got non-native fish that up, that are a very good reason to try and hold onto the habitat even though, you know, even though some ecological purists might go yeah that's that's too messy. But I think in terms of pragmatic habitat preservation those non-native fish can provide quite a, quite a powerful incentive because they're worth a lot to human beings. And at the end of the day it's human beings who are kind of managing the habitat of the planet.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:10:03] I think yeah I think it is a how you go. I don't think you can force that. I think you have to welcome it when it, where and when it comes. I mean I know for example. You know if you take India I mean again. I mean I know Indian fly fishermen who have got into fly fishing because of the trout that were taken over there and stopped in the Nilgiri hills in Kashmir and Bhutan and so on and so forth. But again they're probably of a certain social economic grouping. But again it's a gender thing as well isn't it. I mean you know the sport needs to needs to welcome women into angling it is male dominated because you know it's you know, men get into kind of stuff like that and we really need to really dig our hobbies. But I did notice there's a new magazine out that's pretty much published by and for [women], I saw a copy of it the other day and it seemed every single page was dedicated to women in angling.

James Thull [00:11:09] Mhm.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:11:09] You know. Can't remember what it's called a saw in Jackson Hole I saw a copy and I thought that's a pretty cool thing.

James Thull [00:11:14] Interesting.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:11:16] But um yeah. And I know that women are getting into it more and I think it's so it's a question of just welcoming that diversity when it when where and when it comes. How you go about kind of creating a program that sort of goes in search for it, I don't know, because then you might have issues with sort of cultural appropriation and kind of a form of imperialism if you like.

James Thull [00:11:41] Sure.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:11:42] Yeah. But yeah I think you're right it is mostly middle aged white guys and um, that that has its you know I mean that has its issues but you know that's sort of in a way welcome what's good about. The fly fishing community if you like, for for for what it is which is a really good force for conservation. I mean both in the United States and in the UK it's a big cop force for conservation in terms of in terms of freshwater conservation, river restoration programs and stuff like that. So I think it does a lot of good even though it's mostly you know, people like you and me as you say.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:12:27] That's a really good. It's a really interesting field of kind of study that and I feel the changes I've seen have been for good and bad. I'm sort of

instinctively an optimist and I can remember. I mean I don't know what it was like in the states but I can remember the 1970s and 1980s in the UK. I think we've bottomed out there. [laughs] We you know in the UK we were at the back end of this sort of agricultural intensification followed the Second World War where we became determined to feed ourselves that that led to an enormous amount of damaging work in rivers where we were really trying to lower water tables, dredge rivers, get the you know it was all about land drainage and that really made a huge huge difference. And we felt that you know there was a time where you could make up for everything with hatchery fish. You know it doesn't matter just put hatchery fish in there it doesn't matter [that] we've destroyed the spawning beds let's put hatchery fish in there. And, you know, I think my generation just looked at this and thought "No thanks." You know, we and our movement came on which were in the States you were ahead of us but with Trout Unlimited, and then we followed it in the UK with our River Restoration movement where we're sort of just trying to you know kick back and actually put the gravel back in, do an enormous amount of habitat work. And I think that things are getting better. I mean you know. This River Wye I mentioned, the Buckinghamshire Wye, which the little chalk stream it's an urban river. It's actually really quite good fishery now. And whereas once upon a time there were sort of 50 mills 30 or 40 or 50 mills on that river and very little would have lived in it. Water quality in certain urban areas is actually improving massively to the point where The River Wandle which is a little chalk stream that flows from Croydon, north into the Thames right through the heart of London. I wrote a story about trying to find a wild trout in the Wandle, first of all for The Field in about 1999. Then I wrote it again, in a book I wrote called Somewhere Else in 2004 and neither of those times that I actually ever found find a trout in The Wandle. It was like they were rumors. And I kind of saw this as an emblem of hope, if you can get a wild trout in The River Wandle then, you know, there's future for the whole of the planet is how I saw it. And then we made a film about it in 2006 and we still didn't get one although we did catch one just in the outs in the outskirts of London for the film. Now if you go to The River Wandle, you'll catch trout. Yeah and there's a guy I know on Instagram who posted his seasons catch from The Wandle, or a few highlights of it just the other day. Trout after trout you can go to The River Wandle, in London, and catch, you know, I wouldn't call them wild because they're there but they're river borne. You know they're the progeny of stocking programs that have taken and the that now has a has a sort of body of of self-sustaining trout. So that is a huge turnout. On the other hand. We've got other things going on. We've got a warming North Atlantic we've got massively declining salmon runs. Mortality at sea. You know once it's 15 percent of smelts going to sea would return as adults, it's now more like 4 or 5 percent in our sort of British rivers. What's going on? You know, the eel. I mean that there are there are issues that are so massive and that seem to defy our attempts on a local scale to do anything about them. And that that's much more worrying. I think salmon the north the Atlantic salmon won't won't expire as a species but I suspect it will just have to move further and further north. And that, god, depends what happens. But you know rivers in Greenland will open out as salmon rivers as as we lose rivers and. You know, I mean I don't, do you have any Atlantic salmon in the States now?

James Thull [00:16:28] Yeah.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:16:28] Just northern edge of Maine probably.

James Thull [00:16:30] Mhm.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:16:30] For the Connecticut rivers are all in the states.

James Thull [00:16:32] As far as I know. Yeah.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:16:33] And in Europe it's the same we've got them in Spain and France, just. Got them on the south coast of England, just. But we're getting into hundreds of fish now not thousands. So I think the whole thing's shifting north. Which is a huge shame. You think those fish have been there for. Millions of years.

James Thull [00:16:50] Mhm.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:16:53] So. I think it's you know some things are getting better and some things are getting. Terrifyingly worse. Which way we'll go. I don't know.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:17:08] Yeah OK. So. Well it's the only the only indigenous European Trout is the brown trout. I think over here it's often called a German Trout. Yeah the first stockings came from Germany. I don't know. And that indigenous range is basically from Iceland. All all across northern Russia and around through Asia. And we were just talking about this earlier whether it included. I'm pretty sure it did. Afghanistan the Urals. And then down through. Sort of Slovakia, area, and Italy and there are indigenous brown trout in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Which indicates that once would have been the indigenous Atlantic salmon in Africa. Presumably when the glaciers were as far south as London the salmon without much further south. So that's all brown trout. We have rainbow trout quite a lot of rainbow trout in the UK all stocked in our reservoir fisheries big sort of municipal still water bodies which are very popular fisheries. Are pretty much universally rainbow trout. Actually there are some brown trout, but rainbow trout do really well in those sort of slightly more kind of hot hot warmer water conditions than brown trout don't fry really very well. So a lot of the artificial fisheries that we have are kind of dependent on rainbows. They don't really breed in the UK at all except in a handful of rivers. And I fish a river in Derbyshire called The Wye. Another Wye. We have lots of rivers called the Wye in the UK, it gets confusing. It rises in a little town called Buxton and it's a spring fed river it's quite like some of the spring creeks over here. And that has wild rainbows in it for some reason they breed in The Wye. I think it's to do with water temperatures and light, light. I met a fish farmer once who, this maybe interesting his theory because you get some years in Scotland where you will get outbreaks of little wild rainbow. Come turning up in the headwaters of The Dee or The Spey or something. And his idea was, where they come from i.e. the West Coast of the Rockies. They spawn in the spring don't they see that the trigger for spawning is lengthening daylight and falling water temperatures, was his theory which you don't often get in the UK. Because we don't really have snow melts in the same way that you do. But in the years that you might have snow melt so you've got those two conditions. It might mean that they can spawn and the only other places they spawn seem to be rivers with. Really big groundwater supplies where you've got perhaps really cold water coming through in the spring. But most places might just not be. The right kind of I don't know convergence of conditions.

James Thull [00:19:51] Hm.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:19:53] So there's just a handful of rivers and they are beautiful fish when you catch them. Derbyshire Wye rainbows are fantastic they're just like little firecrackers and you know they don't half fight. Yeah. I love I love catching them even though they're non-native.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:20:12] Well both those things. Water quality. Is a massive issue in the UK. I talked to you earlier about the size of the fly hatch I saw yesterday on Armstrong's Spring Creek which I've never seen a fly hatch like that in the UK. I think we

have pesticides just endemically in the water table. Our fly abundance is a shadow of what it used to be. So I think water quality is that is a massive issue for us. And then the other thing which I feel is is not enough on the radar in terms of in terms of our UK work is the actual physical structure of the rivers. It may be less of an issue here except I don't know maybe in places where a lot of channelization has been done. Probably not in Montana but, maybe Pennsylvania, those sort of slightly more worked landscapes but we've so changed the shape of our rivers. Straightened them, we've taking the gravel bed out of them. And that was done on a sort of civic scale. That is going to cost billions of pounds to put right and that's if we ever put it right. And until we put it right our rivers are kind of limping along. You know they're misfiring they're firing them three out of eight cylinders I figure. You know until you can put them meanders back in. And put the gravel back in and the physical structure from which all of the habitat sort of, you know, derives and I believe that the physical habitat makes a huge difference to water quality as well. Because when a river can kind of live with its floodplain and it can escape onto the floodplain in winter and it has got that symbiotic relationship I think that does a huge amount for water quality. So I think those two issues. For me are really really key and they're interlinked and too often we kind of split and separate them that. We kind of obsess about water quality and ignore the physical thing. But if we can bring them together. You know that for me is is key in terms of. Sort of andron, anatomist fish. You know the salmon and the sea trout it's particularly salmon. It's uh but then going onto eels as well it's just it's just access, access issues. I would I would love to see us restoring salmon to some of the lowland rivers of England. Which where we've probably lost our salmon runs a thousand years ago they were shut out by mills who were chatting about it earlier. That's becoming more and more of an issue. You know we're actually shutting rivers off more than anything, throughout Europe. And you know something we can do it's something that can is it's easy to kind of resolve if we shouldn't really be doing this anymore. We should we should be doing everything we can to restore access wherever we can. Because if you think there's that many fewer sound salmon going to sea, then we need to enhance the freshwater nursery habitat as much as we possibly can. Which includes making every last you know metre of it available for spawning and nursery habitat.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:23:24] Okay. So. I suppose mo- most of all it gets you to places beautiful places. You know it just. The pursuit of fishing will take you to amazing parts of the world or all your home territory and it makes you really look at look at and understand and immerse yourself in those places so you get you you get into the to the kind of pulse of the landscape in a way that you you wouldn't, easily, in any other way although perhaps if you were sort of really keen birdwatcher or as you know. Entomologist or whatever you would. But But fishing is certainly a vehicle to really getting into the landscape and understanding it. And when I travel with fishing you know it's amazing and it takes you off the beaten path from that way and shows you the kind of real landscape. So there's where it takes you, physically. And then there's where it takes you, mentally. Which is not the same thing. But I think it's just so cathartic it's an escape. You can't really be thinking about anything else when you're fishing. So you really turn your brain off all of the worries of life. And focus entirely on what you're doing. So that's. That's fantastic therapy. Isn't there a book? "Trout Stream Therapy" or something like that? It seems familiar. That was at like, a book called Trout Stream Therapy is actually about river restoration. But there's another book about the kind of cathartic healing properties of fishing I'm sure. I'm sure there's one. And I think that's a big you know I know that. There's a song by Natalie Merchant called "Where I go" which is about going to the river I go to the river to soothe my mind. Wash away the crazy days of my life. It's one of my favorite songs. For that reason and it just. That's what I do with rivers and fishing gets me to those rivers. One day I think maybe I'll get to the point where I sort of you know you get to the

sort of Zen Master kind of where I don't need to catch trout anymore I can just go to the river and watch them and kind of know them but I'm too childish. [Laughter] I still have to have a fly rod in my hand in order to really in order to really relate to the river. But you know that's it. I think it's where where it takes you men physically and mentally. That's what it means to me.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:25:56] Yeah. That's right. So that, that book "Somewhere Else" that's my first one and I was very delighted to see you had it here so I, as I say I, I stopped teaching and I started writing in about 1997, 98 and I was writing a lot for magazines. For four or five years. And I started some of the trips I went on were just like too amazing to really do justice to in a short magazine article. So. I just started writing my own kind of longer stories. And I think Tom McGuane just published "The Longest Silence" which I read and really loved and found it very inspirational. And I sent two or three of my stories to Tom, out of the blue, he didn't know who the hell I was and he was very kind and wrote back a letter which was very encouraging saying he really liked them and that I should carry on. And that gave me a sort of bit of a kick to of confidence to send the stories to a publisher. So I sent them to Random House in the UK who really liked them. So that's how that book happened. A couple of years later. That took me to finish it. And then I followed that up with one called "The Accidental Angler" which we made into a TV series in the UK as well. And I kept writing all all all the time really. The book that followed those two was was a slight, it was about that Buckinghamshire Wye and it was really about the history of a lot sort of lost river. And it was really about landscape history and what we've done to our landscape. But there was a big chunk of it was about the trout, the trout had this kind of symbolic presence in the book I suppose. And I followed the story of the trout to Tasmania, and then back again. And the book was all about, there were lots of stories that look like life essays in the book about various individuals who'd had a connection with this river. Not all of them anglers by any means. One was a sanitary inspect inspector one was a geologist and so on. And it was it was really about these issues in a way that we've been talking about about what we, what we do to sort of create our world. And our sort of envision of of sort of paradise if you like. And the irony was that that river is now buried in the middle of the town. The town's only there because there's a river there. That the river is buried. Under the town and they've put a shopping centre on top of the river.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:28:34] And they've called it Eden. And I thought. It wasn't ironic but you can't get more ironic than that. So that book was called "Silt Road" and I did that a few years ago. And actually the one thing that happened as a result of publishing that book that I really wanted to happen was the town council revived their sort of long dormant plan to unearth the river and bring it back up to the surface of the town. So they are now, engaged in that process of sort of exhuming or daylighting it's called. They're re-daylighting the river. So that was just really cool. And then I've just finished a book which is coming out in a few days time called "Silver Shoals" and it's a history of, it's a cultural history of Britain through the stories, of five fish. Only one of which is a salmonid. So salmon, cod, herring, eels, and carp. Carp being the non-indigenous outlier in that. Because carp were introduced to the UK in. 1460 ish they're from the Danube. But every single one of those essays so these I go right back to the history right. Right sort of you know to the early history of the cod wars and so on and so forth. But all this all the stories are really about this sort of turning point with all these species of fish except carp where we're at a kind of turning point in history where. Where are we going to we're going to go over the cliff and lose our cod and our eels and our salmon. Or are we going to. You know are we going to turn turn back from the brink and actually restore these stocks back to some semblance of abundance. And the point I'd make and I know this this story is this the

same history could be written and easily, in the states is that when you lose, when you lose the natural resource you also lose a lot of human history that's attached to that natural resource so it's kind of like a double loss. So if you take the story the Grand Banks, and the east coast high seas fisheries where the Grand Banks collapsed so did those human communities that depended on them. And so we've got to find a better way of managing those things going forward. We've got to manage them sustainably so that the human, so human communities and the natural world can kind of exist in a sustainable, stable future. And that's what that book's really kind of suggesting. That that is eminently possible. If we just you know it's not rocket science. We just need to get our heads together and think about a better way to go out there on our planet. And see it say it's had some quite nice notices so far. So anyways. It's coming out on the 11th of October.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:31:30] Gosh! Look after the planet! Future anglers, and future writers. Uh no I, I couldn't presume to give advice to future writers.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson [00:31:44] I think it's enormous. You know I didn't actually know about until Henry dropped, Henry Hughes, dropped me a line saying suggesting I came saw you and you know I think it's fantastic I know in London we've got us in a library in the Fly Fishing Club but this is an amazing resource and I think that you know well it's hugely valuable going forward. This history book I've just written and been talking about was all about delving back as far as as far as I could. And at the further you go back in time the more scamp the record becomes. So it starts to become very difficult to discern exactly what happened. So say for example how we shot the salmon out of lowland England. By about the year 1066, yeah, you're going on a little shards of information. Well that just suggests you know as clearly as anything that an archive of information of all sorts is fantastically useful and a gift to future generations. To, so that they can you know with, they can use that resource and look back and see things how things were you can only really decide and make sensible decisions about how you want the future to be if you can understand how the past was and how you got to the present. Everything that's shaped now. And then you use that and sort of envisage your future worlds through that. So archive material history is absolutely vital to that.