

saunders-steve-2018-10-22.mp4

Steve Saunders [00:00:09] You know I didn't grow up in Te Anau, I grew up about an hour and a half's drive south of here on a farm on the Aparima river. And dad was a very keen fly fisherman. And from the age of probably about seven or eight I started fly fishing. Done a lot of spin fishing as well, but the majority of it was fly fishing. In the Aparima evening fishing with a lot of wee small whip flies and that sort of thing, yeah. Wasn't till we sort of... he started bringing us to Te Anau on holidays and Queenstown area that I got into dry fly fishing but that was still... I would have been 13 or 14, I suppose, yeah.

James Thull [00:00:53] So about what year would've that been when you started fishin'?

Steve Saunders [00:00:56] Probably about '65, 1965. I'm 61 now, so I started fishing when I was about seven, eight, yeah, yeah.

James Thull [00:01:07] So you've been fishing around New Zealand for, for a few decades then.

Steve Saunders [00:01:10] Mainly in Southland area. Yeah, I haven't uh... I've been to the North Island a few times but it didn't inspire me with the type of fishing they do out there, I like sight fishing with a dry fly.

Steve Saunders [00:01:30] Probably, probably until we shifted to Te Anau about 26, 27 year ago. Before that my father-in-law was up here and we'd come up and fished a lot of the areas, New Zealand Rivers. And then when I shifted up here and set up a business guiding and water taxi work, I started fishing a lot of the more remote rivers like the Eglinton, the Dune, the Worsley, the Clinton. Those rivers really, apart from pressure of people on them, haven't changed a great deal. But the rivers out to the east like the Mararoa, the Whitestone, Mavora, um, have really changed a lot. I think, uh, two things I think, one is farming and the other is the Mararoa Weir which was put on the lower Waiau for the power station. Sure there's a fish pass on it, but the fish don't appear to come into the river, you know, like they, like they used to. The Mararoa I think if it was what it was like 30 years ago now would be classed as one of the top brown trout, rainbow fisheries in the world. That would be my opinion and it's far from it, far from it now. Yeah, the Didymo had a bit of effect on it. Mainly visually I think more than anything. But, yeah that's my opinion.

Steve Saunders [00:03:18] I have two daughters. Both love the outdoors, not really- don't go fishing. Probably one of the highlights of my fishing is taking one of my daughters and she caught a six pound brown one, one afternoon, you know. And her future husband was sitting in the back of the boat just drooling at the mouth because she caught this on a dry fly which was quite amazing, you know. I've got three grandchildren which are quite, quite young at the moment but I'm dying to get them in fishing and hopefully they get the same experience that I got, you know.

Steve Saunders [00:04:01] When I come to town I bought a small harbor business and started um... started it up as a water taxi and started guiding. A friend of mine had a couple American friends that come out and we took them fishing in the upper Waiau and they could see potential of it having a drift boat which we knew nothing about drift boats. I've, I've got a couple of jet boats that we only used down the Waiau. So this young pair guys imported two Clackacraft drift boats from America. And then they tried to set up a business here and of course couldn't get work permits. So I looked after the boats for them and they

said, you know, use them if you like. So the first trip down the Waiau in a drift boat was an experience for me rowing and I could enjoy it. And then out of the blue I bought one of them and the business really... I had clients that just wanted to use drift boats and the Waiau with a drift boat is some experience, it really is. I was regularly taking clients down there 35, 40 fish a day, they were catching. All rising to a dry fly, I wouldn't let them use a nymph. Most of the drift boat fishing in America is nymph fishing. Here we were just hitting the banks with the dry flies. Um, Butch Manson, he really showed me how to use a drift boat. He'd come out and he has drift boats back in America and really, yeah. And the rest of the fishing I'd done was mainly with clients, a lot of clients from Blanket Bay at Glenorchy, a big market lodge. Tom Trusser owned Blanket Bay and he'd come over and fish with me and just sent clients over. A lot of them are very good fishermen and a lot of them were pretty average fishermen, yeah, yeah. But it's changed, one of the big notices- they're one of the big things that've changed in my time of guiding was earlier on mainly American people, when they come out here fishing they always employed a guide. Now you have a lot of young people travelling around the world on 25 dollars, 50 and they're just ricocheting everywhere doing it on their own, you know. And ninety nine percent of them are having a great time, catching heaps of fish. But they're putting a lot of pressure on our rivers, really are, yeah. But you can't blame them. You can't blame them, I don't.

Steve Saunders [00:06:51] I'm not a climate change theorist. I think problems in our local area are overfishing and pollution, yeah. A lot of the- it's quite noticeable if you go into the western side of Te Anau the rivers still look exactly the same, the fishing is- it just, it varies season to season and that's just because of the extreme climate it's in with floods and whatever. But if you go to the eastern side of Te Anau it has changed a lot and a lot of that is farming, farming pollution with nitrates and stuff going into the river. And, um, as I say in certain- some of the rivers, the Mararoa Weir- and pressure, you know. Wasn't that long ago you could go under the Oreti and fish a section of the Oreti and not see anyone else. Now there's not one day of the season that there's not other people there hitting that river and that's day after day after day. And it's, it's hard on the new- the local people because most of the people on that river are overseas people. You know and, yeah it's... We said before like fishing, fishing brings a lot of money into the community but it's not the New Zealand way of going onto a river and not seeing, you know four or five people in front of you, it wasn't that long ago you had the river to yourself or a part of the river to yourself.

Steve Saunders [00:08:36] The um... anything with a lake system in it has got the rainbows in it. But where there is no lake system it's all brown trout like the Oreti the uh... Lora Gorge area, you know, where it all just flows, there's no lakes system in it. There's a few salmon run into the rivers but they've never really established themselves. There are more up the east coast rivers of Christchurch, Waitaki and through there. There's a few perch in the lower sections of the rivers. I just had a friend before ring up to say he was taking son and they caught a perch yesterday. But the majority, what I find the majority of the American people like coming out here and catching are big rainbows. Yeah, yeah that's what they like.

Steve Saunders [00:09:36] If you you'd ask- if you'd had asked me 30 years ago I used to say I used to love going out and catching 15, 20 fish in a day, you know. And I'd run up a river catching as many fish as I could. I went out yesterday, I only seen one fish, threw a dry fly at it and scared the living daylights out of it. Come home and had a great day. I just love being out on the edge of the river, you know. It doesn't worry me, doesn't worry me whether I catch a fish or not, I just love being there. I love- that's why I don't go nymph fishing, I love dry fly fishing. Just throwing a fly on the water and watching it, yeah.

Steve Saunders [00:10:19] Uh, I've always been a Royal Wulff fan. In the, in the drift boat, the hopper- any sort of hopper works extremely well a big hopper and thrash it onto the water and the browns love it. Jack Riley, one of my clients, whose- him and Wendy have turned out great friends, tied me a, he calls it a halloween which is like a big black Wulff. But it's got a purple top on it and it works extremely well but it's very hard to see in the water, yeah, and that's why it puts the wee purple bit on it. But if you can follow that fly all day you'll catch fish, yeah. Yeah, amazing.

Steve Saunders [00:11:06] My wife and I went to Japan. A Japanese client I had shout us a trip to Japan to go fishing with him, 2004. I spent four days fishing with him, the biggest fish I caught was six inches long. And it just reminded me so much of Fiordland, it was amazing. The small- we were fishing small streams with cicadas. And like I say, the biggest fish I caught was six inches long but it was amazing, amazing fishing. Love to go to Idaho and visit Jack and Wendy and fish some of the streams. We've been invited but I'm not a traveler. I can't see the point in going the rest of the way around the world when we've got some of the best fishing right here, you know.

Steve Saunders [00:12:00] I don't think it's a problem down south but I think the further north you go up, maybe a problem. You know kids love being, love being on cell phones and being with an internet, you know, access. The amount of times I've had people in the drift boat and their bloody cell phones rang, you know. And I just tell them turn the thing off. It's... um, no I- I- I- some of the- some of the best fishermen or fisherwomen I've had have been women. You know it's some... Wendy Riley, Jack's wife, an excellent fisherwoman. Really hates handling the fish though. But if there's a fish there she will generally catch it, you know. Umm, I thi- like I say, down south I think it's more of a really outside environment where Jack and Wendy come to Te Anau and as I say within 10 minutes of leaving town they can be in the most pristine river or edge of the lake and be fishing. And that's the only reason why they come here, they, they think it's marvelous.

Steve Saunders [00:13:12] Yeah it is, yeah. Yeah and a lot of the even, even New Zealanders now are getting into catch and release in a big way. I don't mind people taking a fish here, there and everywhere but especially if they're young people and they've only caught four or five fish it's nothing better than seeing a young kid going in and showing it off to their family and, yeah. But it is, like I can remember back in the late 70s, early 80s a group of us as a family trip used to go into the Lochie on the opening of fishing which was first of November. Catching 300 fish over a four day period and keeping every one of them. When we stopped that trip probably about 12, 15 year ago my brother and them finally stopped going in there. They weren't catching the same number of fish but they weren't keeping any. They were all released. Looking back on it it was just criminal what we were doing, but there were huge numbers of fish in the river. We would, we would sit in the old guys, or parent, father and they'd head off up the river and they would catch fish and lose flies in their mouths, you know, and we would follow them up an hour or so later and catch the same fish and take their fly out of the mouth and give it to them at lunchtime, you know. We can't do that now, you really can't. The numbers just aren't in the river like that.

Steve Saunders [00:14:51] Probably 90, 90 percent of the clients that I had were... you really didn't have to teach them. That- the problem a lot of overseas people have in our waterways, unless they've been here a lot of times is they just can't see the fish. They struggle to see the fish and they struggle to work out where the fish are laying. Once you point them out and show them where the fish are, you know, and say well that's definitely a fish, it's not a log or a rock, you know, they, they have no trouble catching them. And

they're generally better at handling fish than while I was ever, you know. I have a bit of a reputation in the drift boat where someone catches the fish, goes into the net, the flies out of its mouth and it's back in the water before they even consider getting the camera out, you know and they...

Steve Saunders [00:15:46] I like browns, browns, yeah. Especially out of the drift boat. They're always tucked in the places where you don't expect them. And the, the I- the majority of the drift boat fishing I've done is on the upper Waiau which is a big river. And... yeah, to see a brown head come out of the water and take a dry fly is quite... yeah. Rainbows slash at it and... you can sometimes be dragging the fly across the top of the water going from one side to the other and catch a rainbow, you know, but the browns are generally harder to catch and more of a, more of an achievement to catch, yeah.

Steve Saunders [00:16:29] There are starting to get a few organizations that are getting together to put a bit of pressure on government and MPs to try and, you know, make changes. Like the farming... Federated Farmers and that are quite strong on water, you know, access to water and that sort of thing and Fish and Game are solely funded by licenses. And when they are spending the majority of their money fighting for water quality, you know, it makes it very difficult for them to try and, you know, make changes. And of course they get offside with the farmers and the people who aren't using... you know, the duck shooters and the, and the fishermen who are funding Fish and Game don't want to see their money spent on fighting people all the time, you know. But that's the way it is. I'd hate to see the government fund Fish and Game because then the government would actually have a bit a say on how their money is spent. And I see our new minister of conservation and that is trying to bring in a- pass a law so that we- they can sell trout, you know. God help us if that ever happens. But unless people stand up and make a statement it'll happen alright, yeah.

Steve Saunders [00:17:56] Yeah. What um... what we think of, of as our right to go fishing in a river and have nice water, there are people wanting to change that all the time, you know. And if you are complacent enough to let it happen then it'll hap- it'll happen, there's no doubt about that. Why do you think people come to New Zealand from all around the world to fish in our rivers, because we've got some of the best fishing and best rivers in the world, you know. And that could change very quickly.

Steve Saunders [00:18:33] I still believe- I think the people that were here 30 years ago, if they come back now, would see big changes. But if it's your first time coming to New Zealand you'll still love New Zealand and love the fishing. Because you won't know the difference.