

sigurosson-gisli-2019-06-07.mp4

Gisli Sigurosson [00:00:09] I started fishing just as a boy. Off the harbor Right here in Reykjavik, taking the bus down with line and hook on a wooden stick and cutting some flatfish and whatever it was in the harbor, and I didn't get the fishing rod at all. At the time. But I thought this was great fun. And then went fishing with my grandfather on several occasions, who was brought up on the south coast so we could catch sea trout just off the coast and went to fishing with him for some bigger fish. But without any success at the time. And then it just was left. like that for many years, until in my 30s I started thinking, now what should they do? As an adult about fishing if that was an adult sport to take off. So I took out my grandfather's gear that I had now inherited and started fishing for salmon and trout here. And then it very quickly took over my summer spare time. My years of fishing have been fairly stable, it's only since the nine nineties or 1999, but since when I was a boy in the 60s and my grandfather was fishing in the rivers here today, the catches he was expecting were much higher than what we're getting now, was both getting bigger fish and there was more of it. That's right. And then also the idea was that you should fish enough to pay for the license. But in the end there also in his last years, he became a little over 90. In his 80s, he had developed a taste for also catch and release. he thought there was too much killing going on in the fishing at that time. That was not. What was the current thinking among anglers here?

James Thull [00:02:41] So he was at the forefront of catch and release.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:02:44] Yeah, just his own idea of, uh, of working with the with the river rather than fish overfish it.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:02:54] And also he felt sorry for the fish. So I think it was an emotional, emotional thing for him.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:03:07] Then when they had been fishing just for sport the only really fish that we have is a trout. Arctic char and brown trout and the salmon for several years.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:03:23] They had a Norwegian who asked me to find a salmon license for him in the absolute best rivers that they could come up with. He was biking enthusiast and was bringing his friends so and been to a lecture that I gave in Norway so I got know him. I didn't immediately realize how much he was willing to pay. But once I realized that I got in touch with the holders of the best rivers in Iceland, where I had never dreamt of fishing myself among the (unintelligible), and he came up with a special offer for the Norwegian and his friends to come to (unintelligible) for several days, and which they accepted. And I went with him and met Daughtery as well, and we started talking about the North Atlantic Salmon Fund and NASF and his activity there, and I volunteered. If there was anything to do with a literary person and editor of Icelandic as a language I could help out with that. And soon afterwards, I got active with him and I was writing letters and comments about laws and regulations here, about the fishing and the hydroelectric power plants and the fish farming. And we got very active together and in trying to stop these activities as far as they affected the wild fish population in the country. So right to this death, he was very active in the highest political level in his work. And I was there with him at the time. And then we have continued to go to work. And NASF Iceland, which is mostly now focused on the struggle against fish farming and the effects we believe it is bound to have on the wild, wild fish population here, as it has in other countries where it has grown to the size that it is in Norway, Scotland, Canada and elsewhere.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:06:03] Convince them to speed up the development for close to containments for their fish farming, either on land or in tanks in open sea so that they can control the environment, can control what gets in and what gets out so that there's no escapes and there's no lice and there's no pollution from the operation and healthier fish and so on. That's what we are trying to get to work, work on and develop with us, because the technique is already there and it's in the process of being developed for commercial purposes. And I think we should go ahead in that direction rather than to continue with the open net pens that have already so proved that the inability to hold the fish in and hold the disease in and hold t lice. It's just one disaster overall for in particular not only the wild salmon, but also the the sea trout that is swimming in the vicinity. And we feel them and we observe already that the sea trout population in the vicinity of the already established fish farms. It's suffering already mostly from the lice pollution.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:07:35] So they are clearly affected by that.

James Thull [00:07:39] So it's kind of similar to any farming operation when a of when you put a large group of animals or fish or what have you in one small group, they tend to spread disease and spread parasites. at an abnormal rate, is that the case of fish farming?

Gisli Sigurosson [00:07:55] That is that is right. We observe here and that is what we read about and observations from other similar operations. And I don't think the business is against that general idea. They just keep claiming that they are now just about manage. A new method to control the situation. But of course that control will never be perfect or they are not really getting out of the way. They are constantly promising the politicians. And whereas in the closed containments, the chances are much better. Of course, accidents can happen in any system, be it on land and on sea. But this is an ongoing struggle. And quite, quite a lot of money at stake and big investors behind the opposition, if you like. But fortunately for this kind of nature. Green nature protective policy is that there is money in the salmon business, too. In the in the angling business. So the rivers here, they are all privately owned. So the individual farmers who own different stretches of land along the river and the river themselves so they control their total control of the fishing licenses. And that's what you are buying when you buy a fishing license is the exclusive rights to a certain stretch of river for a certain amount of time. And so it's quite easy and has been relatively successful in managing to monitor the rivers from this private property perspective. Of course, there can be overfished. But I think we are controlling the situation on that entry, certainly. Well. And so they're earning a lot of money from the licenses and they then don't want other businesses to come and ruin whatever they have got because they have the right to farm fish in the sea. So it's it's not only the nature preservation against the polluting business, but it is a business behind the nature conservation of the wild salmon rights in Iceland, which I think is helping the cause.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:10:43] That, you know, that we are that was that was the original idea behind the artist's work with the North Atlantic Salmon Fund. When he started that last century, the idea is to buy up salmon fishing quota in the North Atlantic. Then already people were observing that the summer population was going down. So we cannot blame fish farming as such for the deterioration of wild salmon in the North Atlantic. as a whole other reasons playing a role there, too. And Ori and others of course, had to observe that. And he decided to take that action. If we can stop the commercial salmon fishing in open sea, then at least you are not killing those individuals and they are then more likely to return to their respective home rivers. And he managed quite well with both the fishermen and the Faroe Islands and Greenland. And that is ongoing. We are still buying up their fishing fishing rights. And there's been more of a struggle with Scotland and Norway and

and Russia. But there have been some advantages onshore made there. And there are also international laws that you can invoke that migrating fish belongs to the home country of the River where it originates. So you cannot really fish fish that comes from another country in your waters because it happens to swim through. And we tried to explain that with the wild sheep, not the wild sheep, the farmed sheep that runs wild in the summer in the highlands of Iceland. Not any tourist can comment and shoot the sheep and barbecue it for his own purposes because it's passing by because it belongs to a certain farm. The farmers running it up in the fall and so on. And that is the picture we are promoting of the salmon in the North Atlantic too. They belong to the rivers where they come from, and they are not for anyone to catch in the sea. You know, that is part of, of course, what we are doing, we are scratching the surface by stopping the fishing as such and stopping the fish farming, the the real problem is that something is happening in the sea that we don't know really too much about. And we cannot control the great overall changes that we refer to in general as climate change. But there's an awful lot involved that the chemical components of the oceans are changing and that seems to be affecting the fish population and of course, life in general in the seas. And we see that the salmon is moving as the temperatures change, then we can observe that they're going to other feeding areas and that it's all open to change as everything else in nature. Of course, there's no such thing as stability in the natural environment. The climate changes and everything changes. But now our human activity is speeding up the change in one direction, and that is part of our overall concern. So we've also been working with the scientists who are observing what is happening in the in the ocean in general. And we are supporting everything that can possibly support or stop for the return. Make that then make a U-turn if that can be wished. In that development.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:15:07] It's a tricky question. And I have often thought about it, and I think there's a mythical aspect in it. There is this this line that is connecting us with the other world. And it goes out of our reach, out of our sight into something that we we can't live in. We cannot control where the fish dominates. And we are trying to reach out into this other dimension. And sometimes we we make contact. I think that is the that is the beauty of it. I think it's the contact that is the exciting part, too. To feel the fish at the end of the line and not so much into bringing so on so many onland. But this notion of sending the line into the other world that generates the excitement that keeps you going all through the day, even though you don't get a single or two strikes or perhaps none, you're still excited for that strike full twelve hours that you're allowed to have your fly in the water. So. There some there's there's that excitement. I think that we are on. That keeps us going. Clearly, we are not bringing food on the family table. That's not the major drive. And and as such, we want the river and the environment to be healthy and clean. And that's part of the experience. You're not reaching into a dustbin for a for a feeling of some life at the other end. But until something clean and untouched by anything except your little floating fly, it's it's simpler here in Iceland because we have not as many species. So but so then the excitement is of course, the size is the difference between trout and salmon. Of course. And then what kind of trout? And so on. And we are quite preoccupied with this, not introducing new species. So it's a great disappointment if you catch rainbow trout, which has been accidentally released from fish farming here to and that is considered a major disaster to get one of those on your line similarly. When if you get the farmed salmon, which they are also escaping and beginning to enter the rivers and that is a similar disappointment. So that takes the joy out of out of your day. If that is what happens. You not only kill, but your report and that it's newsworthy. So still so that that is some sort of negative environmental news, if these species are found in the rivers that are supposed to be wild and self sustainable, and so on. Because that's the what you are selling when you're selling the fishing license is that it's the wilderness, it's the purity of the water and

the exclusivity of the wild fish that is running in these waters. There's not supposed to be any of the farmed animals in between.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:19:08] Yeah, that's that's a great part of it. Part of the enjoyment. It's, uh, it's a we have a few stocked lakes. Not that the idea or the argument is that it's good for practicing a cast or bring your children on. And that is a very, very different experience altogether to be casting a fly. And in a lake where where, you know, the fish has been introduced. And that's just a very, very different experience. And I think that is also the reason you can charge the money that people are charging here the land owners are charging for the licenses that this is the. The quality that you're paying for.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:20:10] I I've not fished anywhere except in California. I tried some trout fishing, there and that trout, we were throwing that in Yosemite. or just outside the Yosemite was much, much smaller than anything we would be spending our time on here. So I was a bit surprised by. But I have a dream about the rivers on the east coast of Canada and then in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. But then again, it's a dream of salmon. So my dreams are very limited to Salamoids.

James Thull [00:20:52] Right. Yeah, they've got some I've got some great runs and some sea runs.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:21:00] And also it is a professional interest in the salmon the east coast of Canada because we have medieval memories. written here in Iceland, which we stored here in the manuscript vault about voyages undertaken from Iceland and Greenland to North America, where one of the best memories they had was the huge salmon that they were catching much bigger than they had seen before. So we reckon they were by then, at least in the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, where the big salmon is, the rivers are supposed to the grills in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:21:49] They mentioned the big salmon that that they catch in in the rivers that they're entering when they were so far south from from the. So the first lands they encounter, which had nothing but rocks and glaciers, and then they enter the forested land and then they come to an area where the wild grapes are growing and or wild deer running in the woods. And the rivers are full of this huge salmon so that we interpret as if they are by then south of New Heartland. And in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence or Nova Scotia and beyond in New England. Even so, where the where the qualities of the land, part of a different nature from Newfoundland and further north. And the only problem, if we can consider that the problem is that the land, of course, was also heavily populated, just as Western Europe was at the time. So it was not an option for ships from Iceland to come on shore and set up camp and live peacefully ever after. Of course, the then the people who were already living there would drop by and ask what their business was. And then, of course, there was a mutual misunderstanding because of lack of communication. The languages were different. They tried to trade peacefully. But that ended in a disaster that eventually they took to sea again and then and remembered the vegetation the salmon and the nice weather and so on. But it was too far and too difficult for them to utilize these qualities with a technique they had. So all the all they could do was to write fantastic stories about it.

James Thull [00:23:56] That's incredible about what year do they estimate...?

Gisli Sigurosson [00:23:59] This is happening around the year 1000. So it's perhaps 10, 20 years that they're active in exploring this part of the world until they realize or find out or

settle on the notion that this is too too risky. They're also losing too many ships on one expedition. They lose two out of three. So then the investor who is faced with that option build three ships and run them and you get one back on, well, you'll get a lot of wealth with that, but you lose too much with the two others. I think that is the calculation and that the memory is also mediating. But of course, these are people who are preoccupied with the qualities of their land and their very keen eye for whatever their land this giving them. So you see also that when they are settling Iceland, the best fishing areas, they are spotted almost immediately. When people are surveying the land, then making decisions as to where to settle down and where to put down their farms and how they're organizing their society. So it's clearly that. So salmon rivers and salmon pools are part of the equation there. So when the people from Iceland are settling in Greenland, just before the year 1000 they find the single salmon spawning rivers in Greenland very quickly. And that is where they put down a settlement and leave fjords after fjords until they finally find the river with salmon in it, and then they see, well, this is some place where we can live if salmon is here.

James Thull [00:26:07] Interesting. Interesting. So the Vikings were in many respects very connected to the salmon.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:26:15] And they clearly knew how to fish it and how to spot a good salmon river.

James Thull [00:26:23] Interesting.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:26:24] And that is one of the memories they bring back from the new world, is that they're seeing that because salmon, of course, we know that fishermen are keen on telling stories about the big fish they catch. But when you observe the nature of the rivers on the east coast of kind of thing, you actually see that the further south you get the north into the southern. Gulf. You're beginning to catch bigger salmon then further north. So it seems to be a real observation that survived the oral memory and landed in the scriptures in Iceland.

James Thull [00:27:10] Did the scripture start out as oral traditions or?

Gisli Sigurosson [00:27:13] no, no, no. It's just oral tradition for generations before it's written down. So there is a lot of the supernatural and adventures motifs in this, but also enough of real memories, too, for us to be convinced that they are not making this up as they go along. And then we also have archeology in Newfoundland to back this up. But it's connecting fishing interests and literary scholarly interests. And then also you can also put this into a political context in this private ownership versus public fishing rights. So which is better for sport fishing if everyone can go and catch a limited number of salmon and trout than it was then. It's tricky to manage to the fishing and it's unlikely to be sustainable for too long. So there's some control has to be taken either by state intervention or by this private property rights that take an interest in keeping the fish population healthy.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:28:40] There can be many models, of course. Like we have for the reindeer hunting here that it's lottery. So anyone interested in hunting for reindeer and with the proper license and so on just throws in his lot. And then and it costs a certain amount you have to buy or be guided by a local so to guarantee some income in the local community. And then then you can expect perhaps every four years to get a quarter of one deer. Perhaps you could think of such a system for the fishing, but of course that requires radical rethinking off the whole system. But that could be could be produced. But again,

how would we get everyone to agree on that? That's another matter how to implement sensible policy and what we all want and wait for five years. If this is really what we want to do. Because even though it's expensive when you aren't living here locally, you can always fish off the peak season. There are many rivers that are not in the high sort of business commercialised category, so you can find a way around the most expensive high season days in the absolutely best rivers and still be relatively active on the moderate income.

James Thull [00:30:26] Yeah. No, I'm not arguing either.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:30:28] Oh no, no, no. It's tricky. It's it's tricky. And we are fully aware of the difficulty and everyone of course looks at them July in their best rivers just a closed block for the extreme wealthy or business corporations or whatever traditionally called foreigners this time in the rivers here.

James Thull [00:30:56] Hmm. Interesting.

Gisli Sigurosson [00:30:58] During the banking boom, it became so that banking time and then they, of course, collapsed. And that is also the sad part of it, that you have the best rivers at the high seas and fished by people who have relatively little interest in fishing and often know very little, if anything, about fishing. So you find that the quality are spoiled on people who don't appreciate what they are getting.