

Additional interview summaries

Phil Atkins, owner/operator, Gentle Annie accommodation and Cowshed Café¹

Phil and Ellen Atkins operate the Cowshed Café and a set of accommodation services at Gentle Annie on the coast just north of the mouth of Mokihinui River. Accommodation includes four affordable lodges, sleeping between 27 and eight people, and a 'unpowered' campsite. The website for the service² describes the activities available in the Gentle Annie area, including sit-on kayaks for use in the lower Mokihinui River, and fishing for brown trout,



herring and kahawai in the River, and surf casting for snapper, rig and butterfish off the beach. Coastal fishing, particularly for snapper, has been improving over the past decade.

Their clientele tend to have a mix of interests, rather than being a majority of anglers – certainly not the types who would take a helicopter to a wilderness fishing area. Approximately 70% of clients are domestic, the remainder international.

Phil reports that brown trout of four to five pound are caught in the lower River, and are generally sea-run fish. Some trout are by-catch in kahawai nets set at the river mouth.

Scott Murray, professional fishing guide, Rotoroa Lodge³

Scott Murray is a professional trout fishing guide and for the past 14 years has worked for Lake Rotoroa Lodge on the banks of the Gowan River, although he has fished in the region for the past 39 years. He is head guide at Rotoroa and is responsible for the other five fishing guides and the enjoyment of the fishery by the lodge's clients. Scott is a member of the New Zealand Professional Fishing Guide's Association.

Scott would guide anglers in the Mokihinui catchment approximately 20 days a year. All told, he estimates that between 90 and 120 days of guided angling might occur in the upper catchment, although it could be more. There are also a few self-guided locals who walk into the catchment.

Access from the Lodge by helicopter is easy and relatively cheap, compared with other wilderness fisheries further south. Clients tend to be 'financially secure' international anglers, and many have a soft spot for the Mokihinui.

He fishes from one kilometre below The Forks and along the North and South Branches, as well as the Johnson and the Allen. The North Branch has nine or ten recognised beats, while the South Branch has only about three. All-told, each beat might get fished once a fortnight. The South Branch can have very good-sized fish (up to 10 lbs). The tributaries, such as the Johnson, has smaller fish (5 lb) but the colours of the trout and the scenery are spectacular.

¹ Phone interview 26.2.08. Email confirmation 28.2.08

² <http://www.gentleannie.co.nz/>

³ Phone interview 26.2.08. Email confirmation with edits 28.2.08

Scott describes the fishery as 'fragile' considering that it has a lower number of big fish, and it is these large, well-conditioned trout (6 to 10 lb) in which clients are interested (although many fish are in the 4 to 8 lb range, the average is around 5 lb – similar to the Karamea). One large fish might command as territory two or three pools and it is a challenge to catch them – clients enjoy the hunting element of the experience. Indeed, people who do not know the rivers well might think that there are very few good fish in the upper catchment – but the fact is that many excellent fish might be separated by some distance and a good hunting technique is required. On an average day, a client might hook three to ten fish, and land up to eight, depending on their (and the fish's) skill level. This has been the situation with the South Branch this season, but the North Branch is not fishing as well – last season the North Branch gorge had many 1 to 4 lb fish, but these have subsequently disappeared (for some unknown reason).

The large fish are generally resident. Sea run trout follow the whitebait up-river in October and November, and also to spawn. They may be seen in the upper catchment through to April, and even June, during which time they might decide to stay and 'predominate' – become resident fish – or return downriver. Large floods can displace some upriver fish, which might be replaced by the larger of the sea run trout – these are migrants who will take advantage of free territory. This behaviour is the same as for many free-running rivers, such as the Hope, Waiau, Wairau and Karamea.

The sea run fish are obvious by their colouration, tending to be very silver with black spots and a dark tail. Those which become resident upriver fish slowly take on local colours. North Branch fish tend to be 'bland' in colour, with a strong green on their back. South Branch fish are more silver, with black and yellow spots and a bright yellow belly. Johnson River fish are very colourful with, also, red dots.

The fishery is carefully managed by the guides, with catch and release only and an agreed timetable to allow water to rest between clients (five to seven days). Similarly the operation has a good relationship with rafters and kayakers with communication to avoid conflict (although when the upper river appeals to boaters, it is often insufficiently clear for angling). Scott doesn't consider the catchment to be over-fished, and expects that the next decade of angling demand should be easily accommodated within the river system. Domestic anglers are few and if seen, the guides will land well below them and walk upriver to confirm the best allocation of water. The first angler clearly has priority.

Improved walking access in the catchment is unlikely to have adverse effects on the fishery, although there might be more domestic anglers as a result. However, the catchment has the scope to absorb some extra angling activity, and fish which are spooked by a non-angler recover quite quickly (just carrying a rod past a trout is often enough to give them a fright).

Peter Carty, professional angling guide and fly tier⁴

Peter Carty is based in Murchison and is a member of the New Zealand Professional Fishing Guide's Association. He has been guiding since 1985. His first guided heli-trip was to the Mokihinui in that year. Normally he guides in the Mokihinui catchment between three and six times annually, depending on weather, water, wind and other regional angling options. He fishes both the North and South Branches and their tributaries, but does not access below The Forks. Most of his clients are older and would not enjoy the difficult access in the Mokihinui Gorge. The flats and sandy beaches in the lower South and North Branches are especially suited to anglers with poor mobility (such as 'synthetic knees'). He regards the fishing as good all season – October to April.

He describes the Mokihinui as a reliable fishery with impressive scenery, holding up well year-after-year. The fish are a good colour and have a good size range. While he has not caught a 'double figure' fish in the catchment, he has seen them and possibly had a few on the line. Generally the catch is in

⁴ Phone interview 27.2.08. Email confirmation 4.3.08

the 5 lb area, which is impressive. While, “it’s hard not to catch some fish” in the upper catchment, there are days in the South Branch, for example, when few fish will be seen. The next day, however, can be quite different with many visible.

Peter regards the River as far from over-fished, although when he does fly in it is important to avoid any potential conflict by having a good look around before choosing a site. The helicopter operators do not communicate with each other, so it’s up to the guides to find out what’s happening on the River.

Peter considers that there is an influence in the upper catchment from sea run trout – as there are in all such rivers – and he has encountered small shoals of 3 to 4 lb silvery fish which are easier to catch than the more wileful and experienced resident fish. One memorable group – almost a shoal – was in the lower North Branch below the Hemphill confluence. He identifies these as sea run fish which were either chasing whitebait upriver or moving in to spawn (or both). While he recalls seeing these in November, they can be present at any time of the year.

Most angling is focused on resident fish which tend to be larger and available all the time.

He would not hazard a guess as to the number of guided angling days in the catchment, considering the number of alternative providers in nearby regions, including helicopter services and guides from Nelson, Karamea and Reefton, as well as the likes of Rotoroa Lodge and independent walk-in anglers.

Tony Entwistle, professional angling guide⁵

Tony Entwistle is a Life Member and former President of the New Zealand Professional Fishing Guides Association, and was a member of the NZ Fly Fishing Team to various World Championships between 1987 to 1992. From 1990 - 1999 he owned and operated 'Tony Entwistle's Hunting and Fishing', a specialist fly-shop, saltwater tackle and shooting store in Nelson, while maintaining his guiding business with between three and six guides.

He started guiding in the early 1980s and was originally based out of Lake Rotoroa Lodge, although he also ran a separate guiding operation. His first trip into the Mokihinui catchment was in the 1984-85 season when little was known about the fishery there, and there was also very little guided helicopter angling. International tourist interest in trout in New Zealand was just beginning and the Mokihinui was identified as potential guiding destination based on its location and existing reputation.

Tony located big fish of good quality in the South Branch, and while the fish were not as large in the North Branch, they were also of good quality.

Through the late 1980s and early 1990s it was possible to fly into the catchment without seeing any other anglers, and the Mokihinui was a favoured guiding destination as a result. At the time, three or four guiding businesses with up to ten guides in total serviced the market. More recently, there have been a greater number of guides operating and helicopter access has become the norm, particularly with the likes of Lake Rotoroa Lodge having a machine based at the lodge. The increased pressure has reduced Tony’s ability to guarantee solitude to his clients. The upper river has been ‘fished down’ and ‘does not fish as consistently well as it used to’, and as a result he might now only visit the catchment two or three times a season, with a total of six to ten times a season for himself and the other guides in his business (only 4 times for all guides this last season).

Tony’s philosophy for satisfying his clients is to ‘under-sell, over-deliver and end with a bang’. He must therefore match his clients with appropriate rivers, and therefore relies on a diversity of settings, including road-side and remote locations.

The Hemphill and Johnson Rivers can still offer good days, but as with the rest of the catchment, the fish can be easily spooked. The area is not visited enough by anglers and others for the fish to have

⁵ Phone interview 12.3.08. Email confirmation 30.3.08

become habituated to people, and not so rarely visited that they are insensitive to angler activity. One day it might be possible to see 20 fish, and the next possibly only two or three. Still, the upper catchment remains a jewel in the crown for backcountry fishing. Tony would use the area when the weather was ideal and a client would be in the mind to enjoy the exceptional, open landscape (in contrast to the more gorgey Karamea, for example).

In the late '80s and early '90s, Tony was based out of Murchison and could be in the Mokihinui catchment every second week during the height of the season (Jan-Mar). His experience was one of recognising the resident fish early in the season, but as the season progressed noting a whole new group of what were generally called 'sea-run' trout, although they may only have been feeding in the estuary. These fish were much fatter than the residents ('obese'), younger (without the tougher skin of the old resident fish), fitter, more light coloured, with their lower tail intact (suggesting they had not bred) and were generally of better quality. This gave the impression that the trout were running the entire river system.

Tony has only fished below The Forks as far as the sandy banks of Lake Perrine, although his partner Zane Mirfin has fished a little more of the main gorge section. However, this area has very difficult access and virtually all guided activity is in the upper catchment.