

Fly Fisherman

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To Kill a River

I HAVE WRITTEN SEVERAL TIMES of a certain gargantuan brown trout that rose to take a foot-long chub I'd caught and released. It was a glorious fish, perhaps eight pounds, in excellent condition, and I have dreamed many times of its sudden appearance out of the depths of that huge bend pool, its leisurely turn, the way it took the chub sideways in its mouth—its spots and hooked jaw no more than two feet from my eyes—and then retreated slowly to the bottom of the pool.

I have dreamed many times of that trout, and of the bright cold river in which it lived. Dimly, in a gray city winter, the fish would rise in my brain, flash its challenge to me, then disappear. On certain particularly grim days, "in lonely rooms"—as Wordsworth has it—"and mid the din of towns and cities," I chewed on that dream for sustenance.

Oh, I was quite aware that the fish might already have been caught. Hadn't I seen a determined crew of men with minnow buckets and stout spinning rods head off to that bend one night with flashlights, when I was putting my fly rod back into its tube? Surely there were far better fly fishermen than I who knew that hole—they might have taken the fish fairly, honorably.

It might well have migrated to another pool in late autumn or shifted with spring floods.

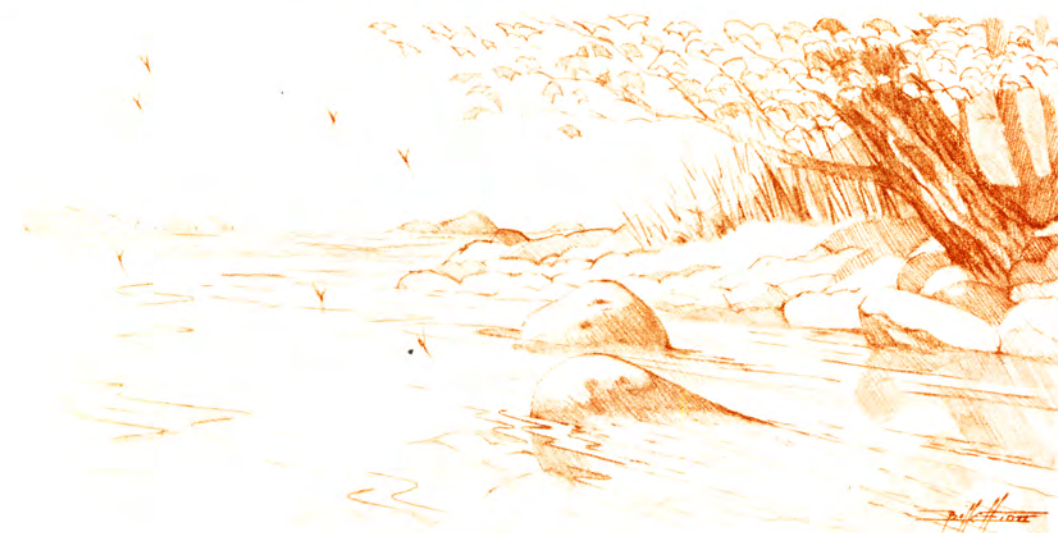
Or it might have died. It was clearly an old fish, the last of the old grizzlies in that particular corner of a besieged wilderness.

I knew all this. But still I dreamed. There was always a chance. And dreams need little more than the faint hint of possibility to survive. I have lived on less.

I knew also that the trout's world might die, for I had seen many rivers killed in many of the ways man has found to kill rivers—channelization, logging, pollution, dam-building, road construction, and by fishermen themselves, through overkill. When, as a teenager up from New York City, I fished the East Branch of the Croton River in the 1940's, it contained many holdover trout of substantial size. Within a few years after the spinning reel became popular, the river was virtually put-and-take. Along the banks of another river I fished twenty-five years ago, there are now nearly fifty tract and trailer homes; I cannot fish it anymore.

When I first went to Montana, I was astounded at the fecundity of the rivers; but I heard then that forty years earlier the fish were twice the size—and one guide *boasted* to me of having stacked trout from the Madison in wagons each fall like firewood. I saw a raft-load of fishermen come off the Madison during the salmon-fly hatch with a boat-net-full of huge browns and rainbows, caught when the fish were most vulnerable, on live stoneflies fished from a spinning rod and a plastic bubble; they must have had seventy or eighty pounds of trout between

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them, and were going to make another trip, illegally, for another limit. Even the West cannot bear that kind of pressure—and Bud Lilly's fine catch-and-release concept is surely as important as legislation keyed to prevent the destruction of the rivers themselves. Even if the rivers are protected from pollution and dam-building and other physical destruction, they will be of little value if they have no large wild trout in them.

What is it that we truly want? Certainly not hatchery fish, no matter how large; certainly not merely a lot of fish, if they provide no challenge. We want a touch of the wild, the chance for the unexpected, a connection to cold

bright rivers in which quick selective trout feed our dreams.

Dreams. How many ways they can die.

"LAST WEEK," ED VAN PUTT wrote to me in August, "we had a fish kill on the East Branch of the Delaware below your Bend Pool. A friend picked up a beautiful wild brown of 25 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches, which he found dead. Perhaps he was the one that took your chub some time past?"

Perhaps.

"Anyway," Ed continued, "he was without a doubt the loveliest brown I ever saw. Unfortunately the East Branch does not now receive even those intermittent cold-water releases, and when temperatures go into the high

eighties, only Mother Nature's hand can step in and revive that river. One of these days we will solve that injustice."

Niggled to death by lukewarm water.

What a way to go.

Not Kepone, not PCB's, not sewage, not road salts, not anything overtly, obviously scandalous—but negligence. For years the City of New York has had reports that a minimum conservation flow would not take one drop of water from the city's needs, but bureaucratic red tape has so far foiled the best efforts of fighters like Dr. Bernard Cinberg, John Hoeko, Frank Mele, Art Flick, Harry Darbee, Dr. Alan Fried and others in a fine organization called Catskill Waters.

How dreary the conservation fight must seem to so many fishermen. They have little enough time to fish, and the whole entanglement with meetings, hearings, complicated legal proceedings, biological studies of rivers must seem too painful or boring to claim their time. Though the numbers of those in the fight—from California to the East Coast—have grown over the past ten years, they still represent a miniscule proportion of those who fish and have a vested interest in the life of rivers. I can only think they're bored by the issue—or fail to connect it with the result: dead trout, dead rivers.

Or perhaps they hope vaguely that someone else will do the job for them.

Mele is a violinist and writer. To the best of my knowledge he finds committee work and meetings and litigation a painful process; he'd rather fish, make music, write

a novel. He'd rather be with a few close friends than a hundred men with a cause. But much of the impetus and ground work for Catskill Waters has come from his efforts—and there are others, across the country, who (like us all) would rather fish than meet, but have become crusaders, fighters.

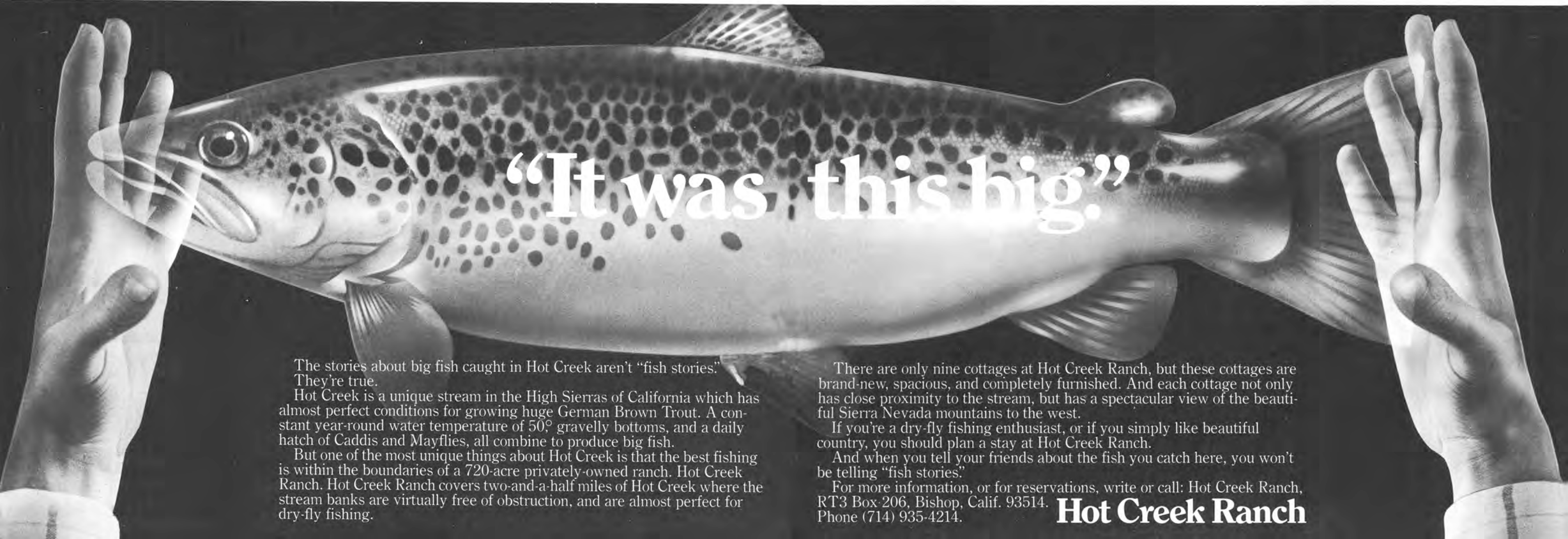
Surely the fly fisherman is on the front line. That brown trout that fed my dreams is, like the canary in the mine, the first warning of danger. The nonfishing conservationist sees the physical damage to the river, the community rises up when they fear typhoid or Kepone. The fly fisherman—who not only fishes *into* the river, but wades within it and must understand its biology if he is to realize its treasure—comes in every way closest to its heart and spirit. He sees first and he must act first.

The river has always been a metaphor for life. In its movement, in its varied glides, runs and pools, in its inevitable progress toward the sea, it contains many of the secrets we seek to understand about ourselves, our purposes. Siddhartha found life and meaning in rivers. Norman Maclean, in his just-published *A River Flows Through It*, is sustained by the mystic web and spirit of rivers. Haig-Brown says: "Were it not for the strong, quick life of rivers, for their sparkle in the sunshine, for the cold grayness of them under rain and the feel of them about my legs as I set my feet hard down on rocks or sand or gravel, I should fish less often."

Without rivers, we will fish not at all.

To kill a river is to kill our sport—and our dreams.

Perhaps forever. —



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