

IN THE MATTER of the Resource Management Act 1991

AND

IN THE MATTER of an application pursuant to Section 201 for a Water Conservation Order on the Hurunui River.

**STATEMENT OF EVIDENCE OF ADAM COLLEY
ON BEHALF OF
NORTH CANTERBURY FISH AND GAME COUNCIL**

Dated 6 March 2009

1. INTRODUCTION

Qualifications and Experience

1.1 My name is Adam Colley.

1.2 My experience on the Hurunui is throughout the system. I have fished and guided on most of this waterway including the North Branch (above Lake Sumner), Mainstem (below Lake Sumner), South Branch, and above and below State Highway 1. I have also salmon fished the mouth regularly. From 1990 I have fished this system extensively and have guided overseas clients on this system for the last 8 years. In my twenties I fished this system for a couple of years almost every weekend. I know the rivers seasons and cycles extremely well and have built up a solid knowledge of all the pools and runs and how each is affected by high and low water.

1.3 I confirm that I have read and agree to comply with the Code of Conduct for Expert Witnesses. This evidence is within my area of expertise, except where I state that I am relying on facts or information provided by another person. I have not omitted to consider material facts known to me that might alter or detract from the opinions that I express.

Scope of Evidence

1.4 My evidence will address:

- a. A summary of the Hurunui River system.
- b. A unique year round fishing resource.
- c. The 3 types of fish available to the angler in the Hurunui system
- d. My angling experience on the river

2. SEVERAL FISHERIES IN ONE SYSTEM

- 2.1 The Hurunui River system is a massive resource of mixed environments. There are 6 main categories this river breaks down into. Please note all flow figures here are based on the reading from Mandamus.
- 2.2 Above Lake Sumner. This is the section of the river above Lake Sumner. It is a pristine Headwater fishery providing regular catches of trophy fish above 4KG with some of the most incredible scenery New Zealand has to offer. It contains a low population of very large fish providing challenging fishing that rewards the expert angler.
- 2.3 Lake Sumner. This provides an important camping/fishing location for anglers trolling from boats. The average fish size is smaller (around 1KG) but again there are plenty of larger fish in the lake. The lake itself provides an important filter in times of high flood, the Mainstem will still rise dramatically but remain fishable.
- 2.4 The North Branch. This is the mainstem between the Lake Outlet and the South Branch confluence. This piece of water is 'world famous in New Zealand' for producing fantastic numbers of fish averaging 2KG but with the odd large fish of 4-5Kg and plenty in the 3KG range. This section of river fishes well in almost ANY flow. Between 10-20 cumecs it produces brilliant dry fly fishing. Between 20-40 cumecs the dry fly and nymph fishing is superb. Between 40-60 cumecs the heavy duty nymh fishing is fantastic and spinning is also very productive. between 60-90 cumecs spinning is still very effective in the milky water.
- 2.5 The South Branch. The South Branch of the Hurunui provides classic headwater fishing. This is a very popular section with guides and clients wishing to fish a pristine headwater environment holding trophy trout. The numbers are lower than the Mainstem (between the lake and the confluence with the South branch) but the fish size is much larger on average. It is less accessible but provides solid numbers of fish averaging just under 3KG with plenty of trophy fish available varying from season to season. Fishing is good here at anything below 50 cumecs. 10-30 cumecs for fly fishing. 30-50 cumecs for spinning.
- 2.6 Mainstem below the South Branch. This section flows through a reasonably inaccessible gorge but in low flows during summer provides great fishing with good numbers of fish averaging 1.5 KG. Fishing is good here at anything below 50 cumecs. 10-30 cumecs for fly fishing. 30-50 cumecs for spinning.
- 2.7 Lower Hurunui River, above and below State Highway 1. A vastly under rated section that I have fished extensively. This open, braided section provides magnificent fishing for sea-run trout averaging 1.5 KG in November-December and still produces plenty of fish around the

3KG mark. Fishing is good here at anything below 50 cumecs. 10-20 cumecs for Fly Fishing, 30-50 cumecs for spinning.

2.8 The Mouth. A very important salmon fishery in January/February being one of the few river mouths where salmon can be caught by the average angler as the beach slopes away quickly and most salmon are caught on short casts. The Rakaia/Rangitata fisheries all require serious distance casting and a 'pro' approach to produce fish regularly. Fishing at the mouth is good at anything below 50 cumecs.

3. **A YEAR ROUND ANGLING RESOURCE**

3.1 To most anglers fishing most water ways in Canterbury the quality fishing season is quite short. In October all the smaller Canterbury streams fish very well with high water and hungry fish that have recently dropped back from spawning or arrived as early sea run fish from the mouth. In November the medium sized streams come into their own as sea run trout start to really push through the systems while resident fish still provide easy targets, having still seen usually only low numbers of anglers. December sees good fishing throughout although the smaller streams start to taper off as the flows drop and fishing pressure increases. By January-February the fishing becomes tougher on all but the big systems unless unseasonal wet weather brings flows up for a steady period.

3.2 Another major factor influencing the quality of the fishing season is flooding which occurs in October/November the big rivers become dirty and unfishable. When the rivers do clear the Rangitata, Rakaia, Waimakariri and Waiau systems only provide top class fishing in the headwaters and a searun fishery around the mouth. The Waiau still provides average fishing in the middle reaches but nothing remotely close to the Hurunui.

3.3 The Hurunui is unique and valuable because the entire system fishes exceptionally well from the mouth all the way to above the lake. The river runs a series of small gorges that provide stable water and good trout habitat throughout its length. The filter effect of the lake means that the Mainstem (above the South Branch) remains fishable in high flows as the worst it gets is a milky blue as opposed to the chocolate brown of other rivers.

3.4 One of the main factors affecting fishing in the Canterbury rivers is fluctuating water levels. The high water provides cover for the fish to feed and flushes out a heap more food for the fish to feed on. As the water level drops there is a vital window where the water is murky and high enough for the fish to remain feeding aggressively yet clear enough for the angler to spot the fish and for the fish to spot the anglers fly.

3.5 All New Zealand rivers rise and fall with rainfall but the big Canterbury rivers take a lot longer than most to clear. West Coast rivers for example can clear in a few hours and usually well

within 48 hours. The big Canterbury rivers can take weeks to clear after a major dump of North West rain providing a much longer period for fish to feed under cover. As the water turns from dirty brown to milky blue the fishing can be spectacular. The Hurunui stays at this level for longer than any other system I know for a number of reasons, but I think a major factor is the Lake filtering water at the top. This provides a unique fishery in that well fed fish become catchable for a much longer time. These fish also handle catch & release a lot better.

- 3.6 I consider there is *always* fishable water in the Hurunui system. In mid January/February most Canterbury rivers become difficult to fish. Fish in the smaller streams become wary in the low flows and either spook at the slightest hint of an angler or stay well hidden during the day becoming nocturnal feeders.
- 3.7 The low populations of big fish in the headwaters of the other major Canterbury rivers like the Rakaia, Rangitata, Waimakariri and Waiau also receive heavy angling pressure and become difficult not only to catch fish but to access for most anglers. The Hurunui, with its high biomass of fish and vast expanse of fishable water, remains a top fishery for guides, pros and novice anglers throughout the year.

4. THE FISH

Sea Run Brown Trout

- 4.1 A huge part of the success story on the Hurunui is the runs of sea run fish that move through the system. These are fish that move up from the sea and re-populate the upper reaches through summer. Fish & Game have tagged many fish to prove this theory and most serious New Zealand trout anglers know how important these fish are.
- 4.2 It is my belief and that of most anglers who have spent any great amount of time on the water that a large proportion of freshly hatched 'fingerlings' from the upper reaches move downstream and take up residence in the estuarine system around the river mouth. Sooner or later these fish (once they have grown fat on small baitfish for a few years) move back up the system to spawn and then become resident fish in the upper reaches. The main factor here being the food source available at the mouth makes these fish grow in prime condition. When these fish move back upriver they are the prime sports fish, fighting hard and having grown rapidly often to trophy proportions.
- 4.3 My own observations of these phenomena are outlined below.
- 4.4 Resident trout are much darker fish that take on the colours of their surroundings to an extent. Sea run fish are in contrast very silver with smaller more even spots. They are usually very well conditioned having fed on whitebait and silverys at the mouth. There are in-between

stages to this rule. As sea-run fish settle down in the upper reaches and particularly after their first spawn they will acquire the darker/larger spotted colourings of the resident fish. I personally believe the diet, which changes from fish to mainly insects in the upper river brings on this different coloration too.

- 4.5 While fishing early to mid season (October-January) in the upper reaches a big fresh sea run fish stands out prominently from the resident fish. Most anglers catch several of these sea run fish every season in the headwaters, providing evidence that these fish vital top up river populations.
- 4.6 I have observed very large numbers of very well conditioned 'silver sided' fish in the lower reaches consistently around November. Most of these fish have gone by January, supporting the theory that these fish continue up stream to become resident fish.
- 4.7 Resident trout select a piece of water and stay there throughout the Summer (unless major drought or flooding forces them to move). I have sat high on cliff faces above the Hurunui and witnessed large trout (definitely not Salmon) moving upstream. I have also seen large pods of fish in the 2-4lb range appear in a pool and then be all gone within a few weeks. This can happen at anytime between July-January.
- 4.8 The Hurunui remains fishable in the lower reaches during the winter months. The fishing is usually slow to average, as 90% of fish over 3lbs have moved upriver to spawn. The smaller fish also seem to be fewer and I believe that they move upstream at this time of year also perhaps following the spawning runs to a degree. The fish that are left are usually quite dark and in average to fair condition, as food becomes scarce during this time. They also fight very slowly and although still determined will come to the net fairly easily. Catching 2-3 of these fish during winter is usually as much as can be expected. On occasion I have come across 'pods' of big, well conditioned very silver sided fish in late winter. These can only be early runs of sea run fish moving up through the system. On one occasion during 2005 I caught 17 fish weighing between 3.5 and 7lbs all within 3 consecutive pools in late March! These fish were all in fabulous condition, were bright silver in colour and fought hard and long. I distinctly remember one fish leaping clear of the water several times. Not something your typical overwintering resident fish will do! These were most definitely sea run fish and again this shows that they are a major part of the success of this fishery.

Resident Brown Trout

- 4.9 Resident brown trout I define as fish that have been living in the upper and middle reaches of the river for more than one season. These are the fish that most anglers associate with classic fly fishing in New Zealand. They feed predominantly on aquatic and terrestrial insects (as apposed to the mainly fish based diet of the sea run fish) and have the classic golden flanks,

dark brown to almost jade green backs and larger more irregular spots. These are the fish that the Hurunui holds in very high numbers. They spawn in the small tributary streams such as the Jolly Brook, Sisters Stream, Glenrae, Mandamus, Seaward and the very upper reaches of the South branch and North branch above Lake Sumner.

- 4.10 Sea-run fish and Resident fish are not separate species. They are one in the same having just grown up in different habitats. As already described the estuarine 'sea-run' fish eventually move up into the middle/upper reaches chasing migrating whitebait and eventually into the headwaters and tributaries following the urge to spawn wherein they eventually become resident fish (over the space of the summer) moving their diet over to an insect base. I consider that sea-run fish are vital for topping up the existing 'resident' fish that may not reach peak condition like the sea-run fish that have fed up heavily on baitfish at the mouth. Preventing sea-run fish from moving up the river combined with today's heavy angling pressure will eventually over-stretch the 'self sustaining' resident fish population. The high number of well conditioned resident fish in the Hurunui depends heavily on the 'booster' effect of the sea-run fish.

Salmon

- 4.11 Although the salmon fishery has dwindled from former years it still remains a huge part of the Hurunui resource, especially around the mouth. This season in particular (2008-2009) has seen a rise in numbers again with reports of upwards of twenty fish being caught some days at the mouth. Twenty salmon in one day is still a very healthy fishery! While fishing the section above the Lake in 2006 I have witnessed upwards of fifty Salmon in a few pools during March.
- 4.12 The Hurunui salmon fishery is a very unique one and although it is not as well recognized as the Rakaia, Waimakariri or Rangitata I consider these secondary fisheries (like the Hurunui and Waiau) spread the anglers, reducing fishing pressure on the key salmon rivers. While it is the trout fishery that is most outstanding the salmon fishery is still a very important one. Unlike the Waitaki the Hurunui does not supply suitable spawning sites lower down and any dam on this system will be very detrimental to the salmon fishery.

5. CATCH RATES

- 5.1 The Hurunui river has provided me and friends/clients with some incredible trout fishing.
- 5.2 I have consistently caught at least 3-5 fish on every visit. The very few times I have caught nothing in this system I can blame (as all anglers do) extremely poor conditions. This has included fly fishing in 100 knot winds, fishing the river in severely flooded conditions or guiding with very in-experienced clients.

- 5.3 My best day on the river was 53 fish (all caught and released). This occurred in the section of river above the Sisters stream in early December 2006. The river had been high and the weather reasonably cold with frequent periods of rain for nearly 3 weeks prior to this visit. I believe the high water and cold weather had prevented the fish seeing many anglers. Sea run fish would also have built up in the system since mid November. I don't have exact size records of the fish but most were in the 2-3lb range. Several were over the 5lb mark, at least two were over the 6lb mark and one fish (although not weighed) between the 7-8lb mark. A fantastic day!
- 5.4 I have hooked many fish in this system over the magical 10lb mark. I haven't landed quite so many! Big fish are very difficult to land in this river as matagouri and gorse etc often grow right to the rivers edge making it impossible to follow a fish downstream.
- 5.5 During one particular day we hooked 13 fish and landed one. We were broken off by all the rest. The one fish landed by my fishing companion that we estimated to be the smallest was exactly 10lbs. This all occurred in the section between the South Branch and the gorge just below the Sisters Stream. This occurred in 1999 and coincided with the beach tree mast. Every 5-6 years the Beach forest in Canterbury drops it's seed. The mouse population consequently explodes and as the trout feed on the mice they grow very quickly to exceptional size. The Hurunui is a major 'Trophy producer' in these years.
- 5.6 I have landed 2 fish over the 10lb mark. One at 10.25 lbs and one at 11.6 lbs. One was in 2000 and the other in 2001.
- 5.7 I have lost a fish estimated to be around the 18-20lb mark. Other anglers also witnessed this fish and guessed the same size. I witnessed this fish that we nicknamed 'Troutasaurus' in 1999.
- 5.8 I have caught at least 100 fish between the weights of 6-9lb in this system, and have caught uncountable fish in the 3-5lb mark during my entire time fishing this system.

6. **AN OUTSTANDING FISHERY**

- 6.1 Having worked in or around The Complete Angler fishing store I have dealt with and talked to most fisherman in the Canterbury region on a regular basis. Having fished extensively myself almost fanatically between 1990-2009 I have built up a vast knowledge of the fishing season, the rivers and the fish themselves in North Canterbury. I believe the Hurunui is THE most important trout fishery in Canterbury for the following reasons.

- 6.2 It provides several vastly different fishing environments to suit all angling methods and skill levels.
- 6.3 It carries a staggering amount of fish throughout its entire length which is unique amongst the big Canterbury rivers. This sole fact alone means that it can withstand the increasing fishing pressure that is growing on our waterways. This provides exceptional fishing on the good days and great fishing on nearly every other day.
- 6.4 The river's high fluctuation combined with the slight filtration from Lake Sumner creates a dynamic, ever changing fishing environment. The high flows during flooding from Nor-west rain protect the fish from the angler and provide large food items for the fish to feed on during these times. The various states of the river between dirty/milky and clear provide yet another range of fishing environments suiting all sorts of fishing methods from the novice angler with spinning equipment to the professional Fly Fishing guide with international clients. These high fluctuations also in my opinion provide an ideal environment for searun trout to travel through the system resulting in the high numbers of fish found in the Hurunui.
- 6.5 The Hurunui is (as already explained) an extensive fishery with high stocks of fish. During January-March when flows on most rivers are low and the small numbers of large trout in our headwater fisheries such as the upper Waimakariri/Lewis pass are becoming increasingly wary and difficult to catch the Hurunui remains fishable right through due to its large volume of water and the amount of suitable trout habitat throughout its entire length. The Hurunui system is the first place of recommendation for visiting anglers asking for a 'starting point' for their New Zealand Trout fishing experience in Canterbury. There is no other river that can guarantee some degree of success year round to the competent angler and a 'high chance' of success to the novice angler.
- 6.6 The Hurunui is thus not only a fantastic year round fishery that has no peer in Canterbury it is also somewhat of a pressure valve for removing fishing pressure on other more fragile waterways in the region. The Hurunui is capable of, and does support a huge following of anglers year round which I believe is vital in spreading the amount of fishing pressure evenly over our waterways. I believe this waterway is responsible for nearly a third of the North Canterbury angling success in terms of fish numbers, quality environment and diverse habitats for the angler to fish throughout the season. NO other river in the North Canterbury provides this in such abundance as the Hurunui. It is truly Canterbury's 'Gem'.

7. PROTECTION OF THE HURUNUI

- 7.1 I believe any amount of water control on this system will spell disaster to the world class fishery that has developed here. Not only will damming the system in any way prevent the searun fish moving through, it will lethally effect the combination of environments and natural

fluctuating water levels that provides such a perfect habitat for large numbers of big trout. Water abstraction will also interrupt this balance as the river is increasingly reaching very low levels in summer. Allowing water abstraction during spring will not solve the problem as this will remove the high water flows again essential for sea run fish moving through the system.

- 7.2 More and more people are turning to outdoor pursuits to slow down and re-connect as the world becomes increasingly fast paced. Fishing for New Zealand's beautiful brown trout is an increasingly popular pass time embraced by young and old, working class and high achievers alike. The Hurunui really is the jewel in the crown of Canterbury's pristine fishing environments. Interfere with this one and I believe the fishery will go down hill at an alarming rate as other waterways in the region become excessively stretched to cope with the resultant increase in angling pressure. I believe we are not just talking about the Hurunui here. If this one goes, ALL Canterbury rivers will deteriorate massively as a result

A Colley

March 2009