

It pays to agitate But!

For most of the last thirty years I have supported, usually as a volunteer “instructor”, the Take a Kid Fishing programme at the Groynes Reserve near Christchurch. It has been one of the most successful events in getting young people away from screens and into the outdoors. It happens each October. The numbers attending are about 5,000 in recent times. The main “Rangitira” through all this has been Dave Denton, a retired tackle shop proprietor. His benevolence and his patience are both legendary.

The Groynes is on Environment Canterbury’s (ECan) land which is leased to the Christchurch City Council (CCC); i.e. it is “blessed” with two layers of bureaucracy. Despite that, arrangements normally work. This year however it shaped up to become the “Day of the Triffids”. The **Day of the Triffids** was a 1962 British science fiction film where an alien invasive plant species, seemingly intelligent, sets out to conquer the world. The Groyne’s triffid is Lagarosiphon major, otherwise known as South African pond weed.

This plant can, and had, form dense mats up to 3m thick (see below). As one local was quoted in news media as saying “you could virtually walk across the ponds [on the weed mats]”. Fish & Game and the Isaac Conservation and Wildlife Trust had stopped providing trout and salmon, respectively, for this set of ‘children only’ fish-out ponds simply because there was no room for the fish.



The initial response from the CCC was that the cost of removal was not possible within their budget. I was a volunteer who helped with its removal the previous year when Lagarosiphon was less well established. The Periodic Detention “boys” also assisted. It was a great opportunity to tell their mates they spent the morning “harvesting weed”. The CCC then countered with a poisoning offer. Diquat was mentioned; along with a three month delay before the water was “safe”. Something had to be done to introduce sanity.

Larry Burke and I are both Executive members of the NZ Federation of Freshwater Anglers. We drafted submissions to both ECan and CCC on the issue and asked to speak to these. The Long Term Plans (LTP) of these councils gave us the opportunity. Our submissions included these points:

- 1. The lack of clarity on their commitment to maintaining the fishing ponds at the Groynes. These are used by 5,000+ people on the Take-a-Kid Fishing days (TaKF) supported by around 200 volunteers from our affiliated clubs. A further 200 people per day use the ponds on summer weekend days (Figures from Fish & Game). The issue of concern comes from the lack of maintenance in recent years which has resulted in **the infill of sedimentation** {see*

later} in some ponds; the encroachment of willows to 80% of the perimeter of another and the choking of all ponds with invasive Lagarosiphon water weeds.

2. *Despite constant trolling through the LTPs we have been unable to find any commitment to the Groyne lakes remediation and maintenance despite it being a feature in the original Groyne Concept Plan adopted by CCC in 2003, and operated very successfully until the last few years.*
3. *Our members are concerned at the ingrained bias by Parks and Recreation towards team sports. A bias that sees football and cricket pitches maintained on a very regular basis, i.e. mowed, marked, resown, sprayed, etc., often for the use of just 22 players, once, on a weekend. We would like to see a clearer commitment from the CCC to recreational activities, such as the Groyne fishing ponds, which are family oriented.*

My feelings about the potential effects of diquat on the ecosystems downstream from Groyne were also communicated in a robust style. To add fuel to the fire a letter was sent to all “stakeholders” setting out the Federation’s “disappointment” (a euphemism), and personal approaches made to individual local body politicians. It soon dawned on decision makers that a PR disaster was looming unless there was a change of heart. At glacial speed things began to happen. The spray Endothall replaced Diquat in discussions and funds were found to source a floating weed cutting machine [below] from, I believe, the North Island.



Endothall is reported in scientific literature as having far less collateral damage on aquatic organisms and has a [break down] half-life of just 5 – 10 days. **Twenty five tonnes of Lagarosiphon was subsequently removed.** It was too late to source salmon from Isaacs, but North Canterbury F & G came up with several hundred trout and the event went ahead as originally planned. There was standing room only around the ponds and angling had its day in the sun.

Photos: Volunteers assist F & G with the trout transfer and release



Not only did scores of children go home with, usually, their first fish, but the hundreds of volunteers appreciated the opportunity to promote their passion. This was a happy ending? Well not quite!!! Lagarosiphon thrives best in sediment (sludge) – note the four words highlighted in submission item “1.” above. It will not grow on hard ground. Until the effort by the CCC and ECan to remove the sediment is made, this problem will keep reoccurring, year after year. Sadly short term economics is not unknown in bureaucracies. **It pays to agitate, but sometimes those resistant to change find ways to prolong the task.** My cynicism suggests that more agitation may still be needed to keep the sediment removal “solution” before the decision makers.

I assisted, with the Christchurch Fishing and Casting Club members at the “under 8s” pond. The trout proved completely disinterested in the usual salmon catching method, artificial worms under floats; so we broke with tradition and allowed “spinning”. Success was immediate and the joyless and dejected became joyful and contented. As one small girl said to me as she left proudly carrying her 1 kg trout, “This has been the best day of my life” (Below right); even if little sister looks more delighted.

Angling has that effect on people. Left photo = Happy trio.

