

FISH TALES on the KOWIE

The Rocky: *Sandelia bainsii* - a Kowie River fish with a rich scientific history

by Paul Skelton (Honorary Research Associate, SAIAB, Grahamstown)

History is often captured in the names of organisms whether of a scientific or local nature. Take the 'Rocky' for example – a threatened freshwater fish found in a few rivers of the Eastern Cape including the Kowie, the Great Fish, the Keiskamma and the Buffalo. The scientific name of this species is *Sandelia bainsii*, after the well-known Xhosa chief of the 1850s and Andrew Geddes Bain, a famous explorer and road builder of the same era. The species was named for science in 1861 by a French nobleman, global traveller and naturalist and the French Consul to the Cape from 1856-58, Count Castelnau. But there is a story to both the scientific and local names of the species well before and after Castelnau published his description of the species.

The first record we have of the 'Rocky' was from an 1815 watercolour painting of the species from the Koonap River tributary to the Great Fish, by an army ensign named Robert Henry Dingle (Figure 1). Dingle labelled the fish the 'Carper' evidently after a similar species from the rivers of the southern and western Cape known to himself and others under that name. The 'Rocky' does favour rocky stretches of rivers and is likely to have been named from this habitat affinity.

The next reference to the Rocky was a brief formal description of it in 1831 by (Sir) Andrew Smith, a Scottish medical officer with the British army in South Africa, in the short-lived 'South African Quarterly Journal'. Smith gave it the name *Diacopoma typicoides*, meaning 'a typical fish of the genus with a divided or notched gill cover', and mentioned that it came from rivers 'to the north of the colony'. At that time, this meant 'north of Grahamstown' and clearly intended the Great Fish River. Subsequently Smith's description was overlooked in the literature, and most especially when Count Castelnau described *Sandelia bainsii* from specimens taken from the Kowie in the 1850s. These specimens are now in the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, France. Of Smith's specimen(s) we have no direct information, but there is circumstantial evidence that a specimen of the Rocky in the British Museum, sourced from a collection at Fort Pitt outside London where Smith was stationed

on his return to the UK in 1837, was likely collected by Smith, and most probably taken from the Keiskamma River, where he was stationed during most of 1824.

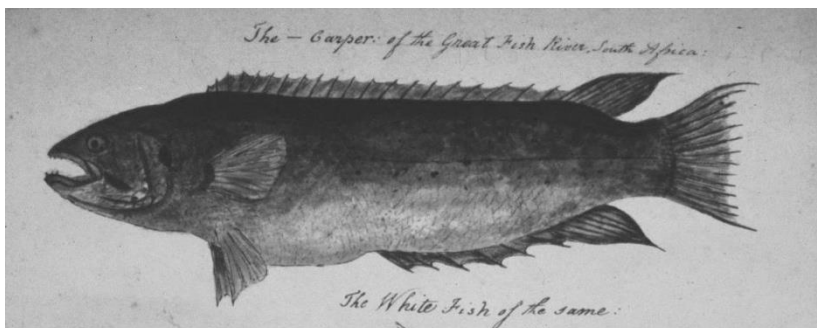


Figure 2. The Rocky, *Sandelia bainsii*, a specimen from the Kowie River. (Photo: P Skelton)

Figure 1. Ensign Robert Dingle's 1815 sketch of the Rocky before it was described as *Sandelia bainsii*. Sketch in the Museum Africa, Johannesburg, with permission.

Today the Rocky is extremely scarce in the Kowie River and it is close to extinction in the system. It is uncommon, but known to occur also in tributaries of the Great Fish, the Keiskamma, the Buffalo, and one or two smaller coastal rivers in the area.



It is closely related to another species of

Sandelia – *Sandelia capensis* – known as the Cape kurper, from the rivers of the Cape Fold Mountains from Port Elizabeth to the western Cape.

Both *Sandelia* species are very unusual fishes for this southern part of Africa, as their closest relatives are the air-breathing 'labyrinth' fishes of tropical Africa and Asia. It is a scientific mystery as to how they come to be found in these parts where they are most certainly relicts from a time when tropical climates prevailed in the area.

About the Author: Paul Harvey Skelton studied at Rhodes University (BSc Zoology and Entomology) then embarked on a long career in ichthyology, first at the Albany Museum (1972-1983) and the then JLB Smith Institute of Ichthyology (1984-1994). His PhD (1980) was on the redfin minnows from the Cape Fold Mountains; his book 'A Complete Guide to the Freshwater Fishes of southern Africa' 1993, was awarded the SA Society of Aquatic Scientist (SASAQS) Silver Medal (Paul later received their Gold Medal). After 16 years as MD of the South African Institute of Aquatic Biodiversity (SAIAB) and Emeritus Managing Director and Research Associate of the NRF, he and his wife Anne retired to Port Alfred in 2011. Paul received the Distinguished Old Rhodian award in 2012.

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