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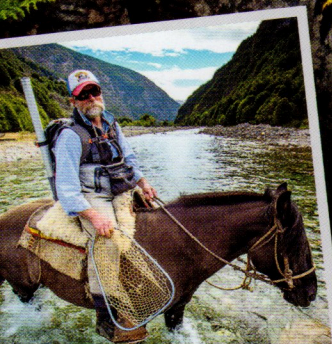
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CHALK TALK

Take a look in the mirror

Are we too white, male and old?
asks **Simon Cooper**

THE SPORT HAS BEEN ACCUSED — among other criticisms — of being too white, male, elderly, expensive, time-consuming, and generally out of step in an increasingly inclusive world. Surely, they don't mean us? Actually, they don't. The quote is taken from a BBC news report about the parlous state of golf and the drive to bring more women into the sport to boost participation. Which, when you think about it, makes perfect sense. Why ignore half your potential market? Which makes you ask: should fly-fishing take the hint?

I'll come back to the white, male stuff in a minute but first, what is the true rate of female participation in angling? The truth is nobody knows for sure because, for reasons I won't bore you with, the data is suspect. However, after 30-odd years in the business I can tell you the number of women who regularly fly-fish is vanishingly small. I'd hazard a guess at 5% but even as I write that, one in 20 suddenly seems optimistic. As for the BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) population, well, hardly any at all. So, at a stroke we are ignoring, or being ignored by, probably more than 65% of our potential market. Going after them suddenly sounds an alluring prospect. The golf industry certainly thinks so; they are building a strategy based around the fact that there are 37 million females out there who have never grasped a club, which is probably the same sort of number who have never picked up a rod.

How realistic is this? Well, it largely depends on where you start. It is near to pointless expecting anyone older than 30 to be persuaded to take up a sport or pastime they have never tried before. Some 82% of anglers started before they were 15 years of age; only 11% were over 30. The huge growth of cycling in the past two decades which has, incidentally, greatly cut into the golf and fishing market, is driven by the fact that just about everyone at some time in

their childhood owned or rode a bike. Learnt behaviour is the most powerful tool we have, which makes such programmes as Fishing for Schools supported by the Countryside Alliance and run by Charles Jardine critical to our future. The seed needs to be planted today, although the flower will probably not bloom until well after most of you reading this today are long gone.

But it's not all about those who play a sport; those who administer and work in it are critical. In golf, where the statistics are available, a fifth of golf club managers are women, which is reasonable but with plenty of scope for improvement. However, only 1% of green keepers are women and there are only two female golf course architects in all of Europe. At this point if you are a woman golfer you will be shaking your head in despair; that explains why the ladies tee is always in the worst location imaginable, but I digress. Back to fishing.

My less-than-statistically rigorous survey of the stillwaters and rivers I know more-or-less comes up with the same data. There are a few run by women and there are next to no female river keepers. On the coaching front things are poor: of the 171 instructors listed on the Game Angling Instructors' Association website for single-handed coaching just four are women. All this needs to change if we want more women to fish and for them to be involved at every level of the sport. So, hats off to Gilly Bate, who has carved out a career as a guide and instructor on the chalkstreams, and Marina Gibson who is a formidable presence on social media. Hopefully, they will show the way for others.

Returning to the BBC quote, let us dissect it. White: 85% of the population is white but that was probably closer to 95% when most of the current crop of anglers started out. The passage of time should change that. Male: guilty as charged. Elderly: I think this one would be a little wide of the mark for fly-fishing. I am seeing the average age of my clientele dropping with each passing year and at the river keeper level there is a fantastic cohort in their twenties thanks to the degree-level courses offered by the Sparsholt College fisheries department in Hampshire. Expensive: fly-fishing is not different to any hobby — it is as costly as you choose to make it and among lapsed anglers only 7% cite cost as the reason for not returning to the sport. Time consuming: it is hard to argue with that one. And therein lies the nub of the issue.

Fishing tends to be a whole-day activity that crashes headlong into modern life: dad (or very occasionally mum) going AWOL from dawn to dusk is often neither practical nor popular. Going back to the lapsed angler survey, 58% cited family, work or other leisure commitments as their reason for no longer fishing. I'm not sure there is any way around this duration issue. Golf is experimenting with bigger holes, shorter rounds, floodlights and creches, but it is hard to see how much of that can be applied to fishing.

I suspect, ultimately, we will have to make a virtue of the time that fishing involves, encouraging family participation and explaining the joys that a day getting away from it all can bring. After all, we are just ordinary people who love a great sport with a great story to tell. Why shouldn't everyone have a go? **TRC**

■ Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk), the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is also author of the best-selling books *Life of a Chalkstream* and *The Otters' Tale* published by William Collins.