



# RETROUT

## *A cross border trout project*

The deteriorating condition of the Baltic Sea ecosystem has been widely discussed in recent years. But through a new project called RetROUT, a joint effort will be made to save the sea trout. The goal is to transform the Baltic Sea into an attractive destination for sea trout anglers from all over Europe.

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JOHN KÄRKI

**T**he Baltic has had a tremendous impact on me as a fisherman. Without the Baltic Sea and its brackish waters, I would have never discovered one of my true passions in life – the sea trout! If I were to add up the kilometres I have logged off the coast – fly rod in hand – it would rival most of the leading marathon runners in the world.

At the same time, it brings a tear to the eye to think of the sorry state of our inland sea. It has been tremendously impacted by eutrophication and exploitation of the coastal zone and now has broad areas with oxygen-free bottoms. But it is not all gloom and doom. There are active efforts to improve the ecosystem through large-scale environmental initiatives and fisheries management all around the Baltic Sea. However, we seldom hear from or exchange experiences with other countries around the Baltic.

The more you think about it, the more illogical it is that this is not done on a larger scale, I mean, we share the same sea after all.

### **Talk of a major trout project**

It was during the summer of 2017 when I was out fishing in the Kagghamraån with county fishing consultant for Stockholm, Henrik C Andersson, when he excitedly declared that there was a major,

cross border fishing tourism and fisheries conservation project getting underway in the Baltic Sea.

Henrik's words rang true, and during the autumn, the cross-border "RETROUT" program kicked off with the countries Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Lithuania. The project focuses on fisheries management and

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increased sea trout fishing tourism all around the Baltic. The aim is to increase the speed and efficiency of the restoration effort, to develop the tools we need to restore the watercourses in the Baltic Sea region and to stimulate and develop fishing tourism by creating export-ready sport fishing packages. In short, the Baltic will be marketed as a world-class trout fishing destination with a focus on ethical and sustainable fishing tourism. As a fisheries manager, I thought 'finally, something is happening across borders', and as an added

bonus, there will be even more fisheries management efforts aimed at strengthening the trout stocks. A long overdue effort, and interesting to see how they will address the problems in the trout streams of our neighbours across the Baltic to the east.

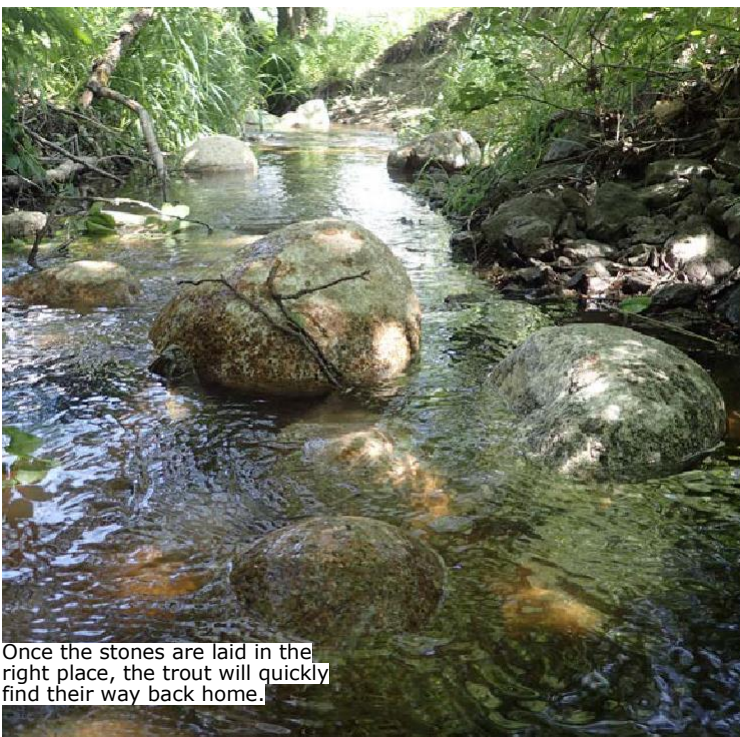
### **The silver of the sea**

The hunt for the "silver of the sea" has undoubtedly increased in interest over the past ten years. On my home turf in





The currents around the Baltic Sea will soon be teeming with new life.



Once the stones are laid in the right place, the trout will quickly find their way back home.



It can be a painstaking, often costly task to restore what has been lost.





Electrofishing gives us a quick answer to how successful last year's spawn has been.



For the first time in a long time, there are trout smolts. They quickly head out to sea, where there is now a good chance they can grow to maturity.



With the help of modern technology, it is now possible to quickly lay down new spawning gravel.

### Retrout

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- The project will run between 2017-2020.
- 5 pilot destinations for fishing tourism are included in the project. The destinations are the Stockholm archipelago, Viinistu on the Gulf of Finland in Estonia, Ventspils, Pavilosta and Liepaja on the Latvian coast, Klaipėda in Lithuania and the Gulf of Gdansk in Poland.
- 12 trout-bearing rivers and streams around the Baltic Sea are included.
- The total cost for the project is estimated to be SEK 36 million, which is partly funded by: The Swedish Maritime Administration, rural development from the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth and the Interreg Baltic Sea Region program within Natural resources.

Stockholm's archipelago, the beaches can sometimes be packed with people, and a number of guide companies can once again add sea trout fishing to their list of packages. If we look back in time to the period between 2007-2010, trout fishing was so scarce that those of us who still went out in search of sea trout were often alone in the bays of the archipelago, and fishing guides were seldom seen. Among sea trout enthusiasts, these years are referred to as "the dark years". Having lived and fished through that period, one realizes now how important it is to properly manage fisheries or risk destroying them.

#### Lithuania 2018

During the summer, I participated as one of Sweden's project representatives in a large electrofishing conference, together with Håkan Häggström (project manager), in Klaipėda, Lithuania, on the Russian border. Klaipėda is a port city with miles of sandy beaches that stretch all the way to Kaliningrad in Russia.

The goal of the week-long conference was to reach a consensus and a standardised method for how electrofishing should be done in coastal waterways. The reason for this is that, from a scientific standpoint, it is important to have a standardised method, for example, so you can compare results and create an overall picture of how many wild trout there are. Currently, test fishing is done using

a variety of methodologies, which creates a great deal of confusion in terms of deciding which are actually healthy trout streams and which are unhealthy. For example, the methods may differ in the number of netters who participate and the number of times a test fishing site is tested. To give an example, here in Sweden, we electrofish with one person handling the electric rod and net and one person handling the cord and bucket.

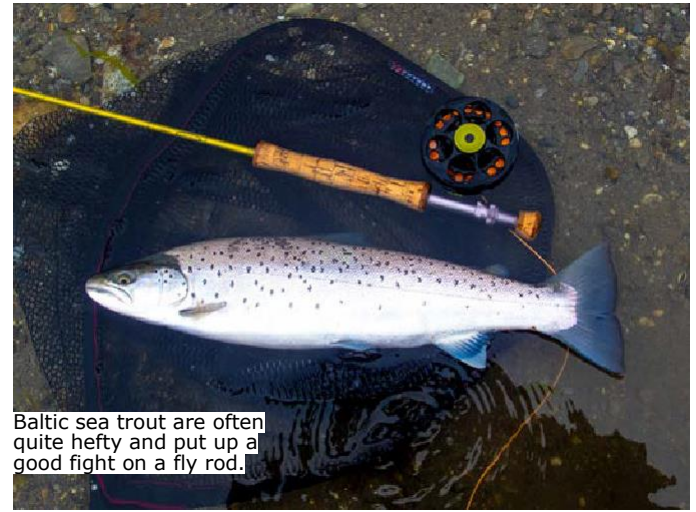
We fish each site in three rounds. In Poland, on the other hand, test fishing is done by one person who handles the electric rod together with two netters. And they only fish each test fishing site on one occasion. So, the results obtained using the Swedish and Polish methods will obviously differ, and how will we then be able to compare

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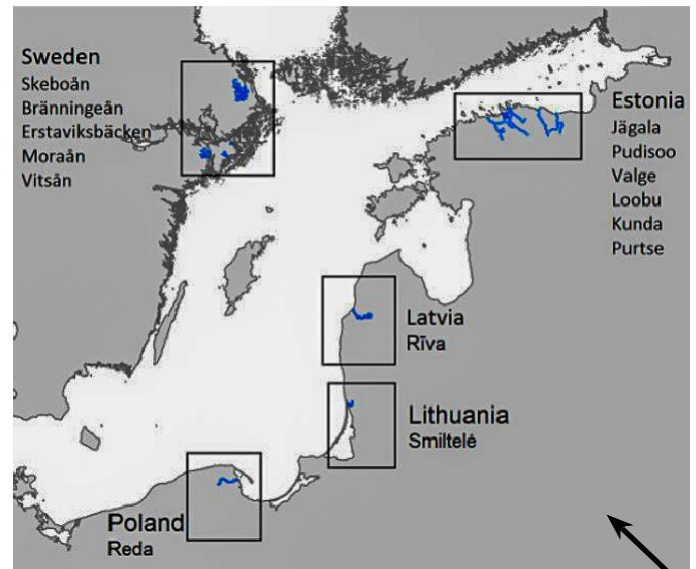




Retrout is based on a collaboration between Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden. The exchange of knowledge and experience is an important aspect of re-establishing the Baltic Sea region as a world-class sport fishing destination.



Baltic sea trout are often quite hefty and put up a good fight on a fly rod.



the figures from the two countries? During the conference, I realised that each and every country uses different methods. Therefore, in the future, all countries should use the same method, and one of the project goals from Lithuania is to make that happen.

#### Importance of workshops in major fishing projects

The important thing in all fisheries management projects – even major projects with all the fanfare they receive – is that something actually gets done and that they do not end up right back where they started. Projects need to move things forward and create conditions that are better than what we started with! If we can adopt this mindset, we will hopefully see a healthier inland sea in the future and also have a better chance to create a world-class sea trout fly fishing experience. Here in Sweden, we have already broken ground on a number of large-scale optimisation efforts in our trout-bearing watercourses. In the years ahead, restoration efforts will also be intensified, expanding to even more watercourses.

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Something that needs to be considered here is that there is currently a contentious dialogue on the internet and various social media platforms in terms of the management of seals and cormorants, both in Sweden and the Baltics. Some claim that efforts to restore the trout are a waste – we are “just feeding the cormorants”. It is, of course, also important to manage the population of predators, but it is never a mistake – and will never be a mistake – to increase fish spawning and nursery grounds. You need to sweep around your own front door before pointing out the shortcomings of others.

#### Towards a brighter future

My hope is that in the near future, the restoration efforts in the streams will increase while the management of predators, such as seals and

cormorants, will keep predator populations under control. At the same time, it is essential that the giant industrial trawlers are not allowed to overfish the large shoals of coastal herring.

It is only then that the Baltic can become a true trout paradise. And cross-border projects that engage several different countries are therefore a major step in the right direction.

#### List of watercourses included in the project

**Sweden**  
Erstaviksbacken  
Vitsån  
Bränningeån  
Skeboån  
Moraån

**Estonia**  
Jägala river  
Kunda river  
Loobu river  
Valge river

**Latvia**  
Rīva river

**Poland**  
Reda river

**Lithuania**  
Smiltelė river