



# **Experiencing the Reisa**

*A Roller Coaster River*

By Miki Aikäs



To begin with, I have to say that writing about the Reisa river is for me a very personal thing to do. It even feels a bit awkward. I have previously written one article about the river, after which I decided to never do so again. When I was asked to write an article about the Reisa for Chasing Silver Magazine, it was made clear to me that, should I not write it, someone else would, one way or another. After much thought I have decided to change my mind and instead I use the opportunity to express my views about this river that is so important to me. I will tell about the fishing, and share with you my Reisa experiences spanning nearly three decades.

I wish to emphasize that I have no business activities on the river and I'm not benefiting anything from this article. I'm just an ordinary guy who wants to go fishing and competes for the fishing opportunities on equal terms with anybody else. I want to tell about the things the way I experienced them. In my opinion, and generally speaking, all too many articles about fishing locations are written in order to receive financial or other personal benefits. The business is often based on the writer of the article benefiting from it for example in the form of getting to fish the location for free. That in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. But to create too rosy expectations to an ordinary angler who may invest his or her last pennies on a fishery based on a biased magazine article, is to me an unfair thing. I will again underline that I am speaking about this in general terms.

### A complicated river

When I came to the Reisa for the first time in the mid-1990s, it was immediately clear to me that this was the river I wanted to fish and spend time on during the upcoming years. A free, undammed river with its clear waters, massive, distinct pools and unique mountainous surroundings made an unforgettable impression on me that has endured until this very day, despite the fact that many things have changed over the decades.

The Reisa is located in the Northern

Norway province of Troms, in the area of Nordreisa municipality, reaching the Arctic Ocean in the idyllic little town of Storslett. The headwaters of the river are in a large National Park in the mountainous region between Finland and Norway, and the river runs without any obstacles for the migrating salmon for some 80 km towards the Arctic Ocean.

The river can be divided into two main parts, of which the 40-kilometer lower part runs through areas owned privately or by the state, all accessible from nearby roads. The upper part runs inside the national park, ending in Imofossen, a waterfall in the headwaters. This is state owned to near 100 %. All salmon fishing is divided into nineteen distinct zones ("Sone" in Norwegian), where the fishing takes place. The zones 1-10 make up the lower half, and the zones 11-19 belong to the upper section. The National Park actually doesn't start until zone 13, and it is precisely in those incredibly beautiful areas that the character of the river changes dramatically and the valley forms into a canyon.

However, the tourist fishing takes place mostly in the lower section of the river, where the fishing spots are easily accessible without a boat, whereas the upper section is normally accessed by riverboats going upstream from where the public road ends, in zone 11.

### Administration by the local River Board

Reisa has maybe the most intricate rights situation in all of Norway's several hundred salmon rivers. Fishing on the river is administered by the Reisa Elvelag – the Reisa River Board- which was founded in 1995 as a result of a complex land court decision, that settled and clarified the rights issue regarding fishing in the Reisa river after years of conflicts and unclarity. The landowners have 60 % of the fishing rights and the inhabitants living permanently within the borders of Nordreisa municipality (actually the old borders from 1963 when the municipality was smaller in area) have the remaining 40 % of the fishing rights.

The management of today is a result of a stepwise process. It started in 1988

when the Norwegian State demanded a land court case to decide on a system of use and management for the fishing in the salmon-carrying part of the Reisa river. Reisa Elvelag bring together the landowners and the representatives for local fishers to jointly manage the fishery in the salmon-bearing part in a sustainable way for the benefit of the members and in accordance with the Norwegian law for salmon management. Reisa Elvelag shall ensure that the biological production basis in the river is protected. They should also facilitate local business development and can sell fishing licenses to external parties (e.g. local accommodation businesses and outfitters). In 2012, a revision took place establishing new statutes for the Reisa Elvelag. As a result of this revision, a new fishing system with day permits started in 2015.

### Fish population

The river's fish species mainly consist of salmon, anadromous Arctic char, and sea trout. There are also some local trout and sculpins that compete with salmon parr. Concern has been raised over the sculpins especially, since research has addressed their impact on the lives of the parr, freely quoted below:

"Food resource partitioning between Siberian sculpin and Atlantic salmon parr had almost identical diets, feeding primarily on benthic invertebrates and selecting the same prey species. The results suggest that the two species compete for food, and that interspecific competition for limited food resources may explain the low production of Atlantic salmon in this river. The observation of a high degree of dietary overlap between the sculpin and the salmon parr contrasts with expectation of interactive segregation. Further, the findings conflict with general niche and competition theories, being inconsistent with the competitive exclusion principle." (Sanchez-Hernandes, Gabler & Amundsen, 2016. Full info at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10750-015-2547-z>).



The middle of the lower part.

High water requires wading.





Simple flies work extremely well in Reisa. ▲



Basic Reisa salmon. ▲



Mollisfossen, in zone 16, one of the most beautiful waterfalls in northern Norway. ▲

*I don't think the Reisa was ever a "steady" salmon river, as can be seen from the old Norwegian salmon statistics.*

As in many other salmon rivers, the trend also in the Reisa has been negative. The last season was poor, as was the one before that, but there were still some good moments as well. The uncommon spring and the long spells without any rains sank the water very low. This may have been a part of the reason why the fish stopped running earlier than usual. The same phenomenon happened also in the previous season. The long-awaited rains finally came in August, however we saw no sign of the previously common special late run.

Personally, I've observed small numbers of parr in the past few seasons. The aforementioned sculpin has been thought to be one of the reasons for the low parr densities. Others have pointed to the situation in the sea: fish farming and the impacts linked to it, such as sea lice infestation on salmon smolts, and net and trap fishing in the fjords. Also, impacts from climate change

on conditions in the ocean can have contributed to the reduced abundance of Reisa salmon. However, unlike many other salmon rivers, where there is a rather clear diagnosis for the causes for reduced salmon production, in the Reisa scientists are not fully aware of what is wrong. There is no hydro-power impacts, nor pollution. Sea lice is a lesser problem in the north than in the south. And while harvest at sea is significant in the north, the Reisa has seen strict harvest reductions in the river for more than a decade now. Consequently, there are many speculations and theories, but no clear diagnosis. As far as I can see, the river in itself is healthy, but there is definitely something wrong and the spawning stock and juvenile fish density is now below targets set by the authorities.

There are different ways to monitor the numbers of spawning fish and the parr, among others diving in the river to count them in the fall and electrofishing

sampling of the parr. This is part of the annual monitoring taking place in the Reisa. In the previous season a lot of Pink salmon entered the river, and there were various methods to try to remove them. The same phenomenon was also observed in many other Northern rivers. All of this is due to us humans. It is sad.

I have also observed the diminishing anadromous Arctic char population. While this is a trend that has affected Arctic char in all of Northern Norway and climate change impacts are the usual explanation, I have been wondering whether the decision of protecting the salmon in the beginning of the 21st century played a major role as well. When the popularity of salmon fishing in the Reisa started to grow in the years following the change of the millennium and a partial C&R was established for salmon in order to protect the population, I think the balance of nature changed. Human

activities to protect the salmon could put the char population at risk. However, I emphasize that these are merely my own thoughts on the matter.

**Strongly restricted fishing**

When the popularity of salmon fishing "exploded" on the Reisa, as well as in other rivers in Northern Norway, the commercial interests became much more up front and started to influence the local management to a much larger degree than in the "old days." When I started to come to the river all those years ago, it was easy to get a license, and it was cheap. Now it is difficult to get licenses, and the prices are ten times higher. As there are few licenses to be accessed and the fishing is strongly restricted, which is of course good from the salmon's point of view, an ordinary guy like me has a hard time getting a license for a non-resident.

This year, they decided to shorten

the season for ten days more not opening until 10th July, which caused grey hairs to many anglers. My opinion is that postponing the start date of the season has little impact on the numbers of fish coming to the river. The reasons for the low number of fish lie entirely elsewhere.

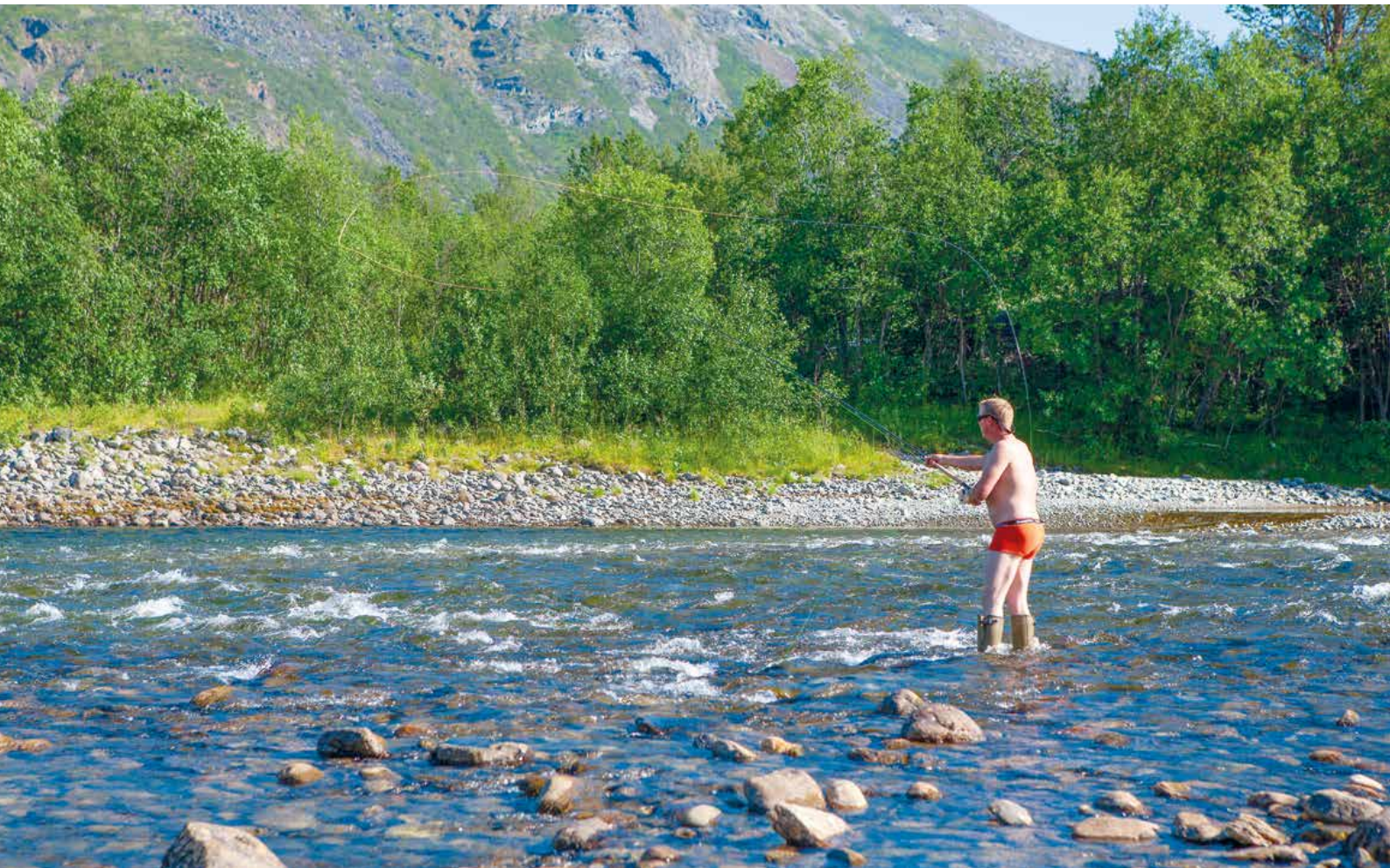
I don't think the Reisa was ever a "steady" salmon river, as can be seen from the old Norwegian salmon statistics. By this I mean that the fluctuation in the numbers of fish have been surprisingly big, at least during the time I've fished the river. Of course, natural fluctuations in salmon populations happens everywhere, but out of the rivers I've fished in Norway over the decades, the Reisa is possibly the one that resembles a roller coaster the most, with long downhills and up-hills. When the fishing is poor, it seems to go on really long, and correspondingly, if and when the good years come, they are steadily good.



Perfect drift.







Hot day and low water. No waders needed. ▲

The current statistics points to a significant peak during the years 2006-2011, when the numbers of caught fish were generally good and there were several 20kg+ salmon each year. Over the past few years, the situation has clearly deteriorated, which brings to mind the roller coaster again.

There are not all that many big salmon rivers in Northern Norway specifically but also when we look at the Barents region more generally. When I talk about big fish rivers, I am referring to rivers that annually produce really big fish. By big I mean many over 30 pounds and every year several over 40. The Alta, Tana, Lakselva, and Reisa are primarily such rivers in Norway (also Finland regarding Tana), together with majestic rivers like Kola and Yokanga on the Russian side. The Reisa is from the outset different from the Lakselva and Alta in that the salmon have a lot more space to spread and vanish in the river. The river is long, and, in a sense, it is difficult to compare the numbers of fish in other ways than

just the catch statistics.

I have sometimes heard it said by locals that they're going to make the Reisa the next Alta. I don't think it is possible, or even sensible, not in any way. Having fished both rivers, my opinion is that in terms of the fish numbers alone the difference is so big that a lot of good things (seen from a Reisa perspective, that is) would have to happen before the two could be compared on the same premises. As I mentioned above, the Reisa has generally always had a much sparser and thinner stock of salmon, never with catches nearing that of the others, maybe with the exceptions of a few years around 2010.

Anyhow, the situation does not seem very positive right now, and if the negative trend continues, the fishery for salmon in the Reisa runs the risk of closure for a period of some years. I do sincerely hope there will be some improvement, one way or another. Various alternatives for recovery

measures have been suggested and studied, one of which might be the river's own hatchery. According to Norwegian authorities this is not likely at all, given the recent policy against hatcheries in Norway. Of course, everybody would like to go back to the fishing of the hey-years, but in my opinion the first thing to be looked at is the reasons for the fluctuations of the fish populations. When there is better knowledge of what is going on, different recovery measures can be conducted on a sustainable basis. I don't think there are any shortcuts, and focus on short-term incomes will not necessarily work in the long run. In this matter everybody ought to do their part, tourists and the locals alike.

Fishing rights

The license system on the river is as I mentioned very complicated and hard to explain to those not familiar with the river. For the non-resident angler,

fishing needs to be based on the so-called landowners' licenses that they get from the Elvelag in accordance to their property rights. These can be subject to reselling to non-residents. In this case, the State is also a landowner and sells licenses to the areas it owns in a similar way as private landowners.

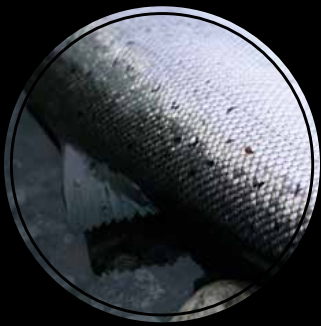
The landowners can also sell licenses to people running tourism businesses and acting as outfitters. In these cases, the organizer determines the prices based on demand for the fishing and the quality of the pools, other services such as the accommodation quality, meals, guiding and so forth. This naturally depends on the organizer, how and where the fishing has been marketed, and on the images the potential customers hold of the operation. The price-quality ratio is naturally up to each fisherman to judge.

When the fishing turns bad there is no reason to fall into despair or to succumb to dubious methods to improve catches, no matter how much people have paid for their fishing. The most excessive stories claim that explosives have been thrown into the pools to get the salmon moving. I wasn't there to witness it myself, thank God, but I have heard the story from entirely different sources so I do not doubt its credibility.

When planning fishing the Reisa it is worth noticing that the locals have very special rights. When a local fisherman buys the license to an area, he is allowed to fish all the pools inside that area, so there is no completely exclusive fishing anywhere, ever on the Reisa. This may come as a surprise to many tourists who have bought expensive licenses, especially if they think they are fishing in an entirely exclusive and private pool.

Contacts created along the river over a long period of time of course makes it easier to access licenses, but in practice, here as elsewhere, the old saying "those who've got the chalk do the drawing" holds true.

There are licenses to the upper reaches of the river that are not difficult to buy, but you need to rent a boat or do significant walking to get there. Also, in the past few years, the fishing in the upper parts has suffered severely, and the busy boat traffic may cause problems for the fishing, at least partly spoil the wilderness feeling.



Dear Lord

**T**he last season's most memorable occasion happened in the beginning of July. The fishing had been quiet in the areas I normally fish. Luckily, a friend had helped me getting a license to the Haugset beat in the lower part of the river. My friends had caught fish from the pool, and I was indeed filled with expectations when I drove there in the morning. The water was at a good height, and I was fishing a great glide between two strong rapids with a friend of mine. We both managed to catch a salmon by noon, and I was extremely satisfied, because I had not even seen a salmon in the previous days.

*In the afternoon I went out to get something to eat and returned to Haugset at dusk. I sat for quite some time with the master of the household and a local friend of his, talking about fishing. Sometime later my friend turned up and we decided to fish some more.*

*I went first and had almost reached the end of the pool when a fish took my Ally's Shrimp. I felt straight away that it was a big fish. I pulled as hard as I dared, but the salmon would not come to the surface. It just swam in circles and probably didn't even realize it was hooked. My friend told me that I shouldn't let the fish swim downstream to the next rapids or we would be in trouble. I tried to pull the salmon upstream in the pool, but it simply refused to cooperate. The one time the fish came to the surface I didn't manage to see it too well, but my friend, who was further downstream nearer to the fish saw it properly and just said: "Dear Lord..." A big salmon...*

*A boat came with two fishermen heading upstream. They noticed the situation and dutifully beached the boat and came to see how I was doing. I asked them whether I could get in the boat if the fish decided to go downstream. They said of course I could. At the same time the salmon obviously decided that he had had enough of this game and headed downstream at full speed. I tried to make it stop, but, all of a sudden, the line felt loose. What the...? Disappointedly I reeled the line in and found out that the leader had failed. I don't know what happened, but the 0.45 leader was cleanly severed and about half of it was gone.*

*I tried to keep my cool, but I'm sure the disappointment was all over my face. It had been a big fish.*

*In my life, I have hooked many big fish, some of which I have even managed to land and measure. Almost all of them were peaceful in the beginning, just swimming slowly or staying still. I think a big salmon does not realize it is hooked, or simply doesn't care. At some point, however, it gets irritated by the desperate attempts of the fisherman and decides to go. Sometimes it is simply too powerful for the fisherman to control and it just breaks loose. Sometimes, however, all the stars are in the correct place and the fish can be landed.*





## Nobody owns the salmon.

The upper parts are possibly the most beautiful wilderness salmon river I have ever visited. Years ago, I fished there on several occasions, enjoying some great fishing. The river there is smaller in scale and plenty of fish reached the headwaters in the good years. However, those areas are important in terms of recruitment of the stock, so protecting them from too much fishing pressure is essential for the future. Unfortunately, the spawning stock in this part is the poorest of the entire river.

### Big salmon river

Fishing in the Reisa is hardly any different from fishing in the other rivers. The reigning fish of the early season is an MSW hen measuring 20 – 25 pounds on average, and the chances for a big salmon are reasonably good. Every year, fish around the 20 kg mark are caught in the river, but as every one of us knows, all the stars have to be in the right position in order for you to hook, not the least to land one of them. The Reisa is a big salmon river, but, as everywhere, the really big fish are rare. In some years, the runs have reasonably many four sea-year buck salmon, and then it is possible that several of them are landed during one season.

I believe the share of two sea-year salmon in the river has always been small. Back in the days, a fish of 4 -5 kg was really rare. The grilse were nice ones, around 3 kg, but these days they are nearly nonexistent and have been replaced by smaller grilse between 1-1.5 kg. In old days I have indeed experienced great fishing in August, often catching those 3 kg salmon on single-handed rods.

I have fished for salmon in the Reisa basically throughout the season, and as the river the last years has opened 1st July, I'd say the two first weeks of July are the best for catching bright silver salmon. If I were to play it safe,

however, I would choose a week around the turn of July-August when there are already some fish in the river. The water is at the normal level and it is easier to get licenses. Everybody wants to come to the premiere of the season, but I could personally state that this period halfway through the season has offered me the best fishing.

At this point we naturally approach the question of what is to be considered good salmon fishing. I think it means getting in close contact with the fish, and that is difficult when the water is high. As things stand, the fishing regulations and the license issues versus the number of people wanting to fish the Reisa are not in balance, and further still when the fishing pressure is the highest in the beginning of the season. I fail to see why people consider it a must to get there just then, when it's so easy to get better fishing in an easier way, also on the Reisa.

### Tools and flies

I think the best tool for Reisa fishing is a sturdy two-handed rod. As there is always the possibility of hooking up with the Big one, the reel ought to have a good amount of backing. Strong leaders are a sensible choice. Early in the season, my choices are 0.45, later 0.40 mm. Early in the season I fish with 15-foot rods and usually switch to 14-footers when the water goes down towards August, depending on the water conditions and the places. Generally speaking, the 15-foot rod is a good choice.

For most of the season, I use a floating belly and different tips from intermediate all the way to sink-6, depending on the situation. I hardly ever use full floating lines. Sinking lines I use a lot, early in the season in particular. Mostly I choose my line according to the current, not as much the depth of the pool, and my favorite sink lines are inter-2-4 and sink 1-3-5. The character

of the river is well suited for different lines, as the pools are easy to read.

The wading is generally easy, and there are many pools that can be fished with dry boots. However, I have noticed that in salmon fishing the correct positioning is extremely important, so at times it is necessary to wade in order to get the line and the fly in the correct angle. Here, as well as in other salmon rivers, the correct presentation of the fly is all-important. Of course, useless, deep wading is always to be avoided, and in many pools the fish are lying close to the shore you are fishing. It is worth the effort to learn to cast from both sides so no pool remains unfished just because you can't cast from the "wrong" side. It is also important to move peacefully and avoid unnecessary trashing of the line. It is more important to straighten the leader properly than making the casts as long as possible, so that the fly starts swimming straight away. It is worth keeping in mind that the water is really clear and the fish can see the fly from far away, so it's no use to stay in the same place for long. One cast, the drift, and a good distance down the pool before the next cast is my approach.

The choice of fly causes problems to many fishermen. Sometimes salmon fishing feels easy, most often not. Early in the season, bigger and more colorful flies work here as elsewhere, and each angler has his or her favorites. I switch to more mild-colored flies halfway through the season, and more often than not somewhat smaller and harmonious flies with natural shades are the right choice. Towards the end of the season the fish get more aggressive again as the spawning time approaches, and at that point my absolute favorite is a small Ally's Shrimp. Modest shades tied on a small, size 10 treble hook make an unfailing fly that I've fooled a good number of big fish with.

My other fly favorites include, among others, the Vimur, Glödhäck,



Beautiful MSW salmon. ▲

Silver Grey, Green Highlander, Sunray, Phatagorva, Strömsö, and many others. If I had to choose four flies for the entire Reisa season, they would be the Vimur as a general fly, Silver Grey for cloudy days, Green Highlander for sunny conditions, and an Ally's Shrimp to tease the aggression of the fish.

### What is so special

The Reisa is a beautiful river. It has treated me well, and I hope to be able to fish there for a long time to come. The river is perfectly suited for fly fishing and has a good potential, as we have seen in some periods, also recently. But it needs to be managed on a sustainable basis. There are of course problems, most of them caused

by humans. Over time, I have made many friends along the Reisa: locals, landowners, tourists, and organizers of fishing. I have gotten along well with all of them, although I might not always agree with all of them about everything. Agreeing about things at the local level nevertheless determines most of the fishing in the river and its organization. It should be kept in mind that the cause of the problems is not always the tourist; problems surface also on the local level, especially when it's about money and the financial aspects of natural resources.

There will always be some who are willing to bend the rules and some who will intervene, among local anglers as well as among tourists. However, I think most of the people along the river are quite

sensible, and it is good to notice that in most circumstances, the bad apples are kept in check. As the only element in the overall picture causing problems is the human, it should be preferable that the riverside nature and the Reisa salmon should not suffer from unsustainable human activities.

Nobody owns the salmon.

*As I write this in April 2020, the fishing in the Reisa and other rivers is very uncertain due to the Covid-19 virus. All of us on this planet are living on borrowed time anyway, so I think every summer we can still fish for Atlantic Salmon is a victory. It is possible that no foreigners can fish in the Reisa this summer, but I'm still hoping to be able to go there and fish. ●*