

Anglers can clean up with 'mop' fly that fish find irresistible (but where's the fun in that?)

OWEN HUMPHREYS/PA

Simon de Bruxelles

You might think that fly fishermen engaged in a struggle of wits with the wily brown trout would welcome anything that could give them the upper hand. Not a bit of it.

"Hell is a fish every cast," says Simon Cooper, a fly-fishing guide on the River Test, the crystal clear chalk stream where the sport was developed into an art form more than 150 years ago.

This most slow moving of pastimes is changing for the first time in years with the introduction of the mop fly, the latest novelty from the United States, where fly-fishing is even more of an obsession than in Hampshire.

Instead of spending the winter months tying elaborate artificial flies made from peacock feathers and silver threads that look like real insects, one American angler went to his local hardware shop and bought a mop. He cut up the microfibre strands, sewed them to fish hooks and confirmed his suspicion that trout have an insatiable appetite for soggy bits of plastic.

The innovation has caused controversy in fly-fishing circles and been banned from several competitions in the US. The problem is that it is just too easy, and traditional fly fishermen relish the challenge as much as the catch.

Mr Cooper says he does not believe in banning things. However, in the heartland of fly-fishing, using anything that does not look like a "real" insect has been frowned upon for generations. The art lies in choosing a fly that looks like whatever the trout are eating at that moment. Some anglers have been known to examine a fish's stomach contents before deciding which fly to use.

Mr Cooper said: "No one's quite sure what makes the mop fly work, which is part of the controversy. It doesn't look much like anything."

"The idea of fly-fishing is that you are tying something on the end of your line that imitates something in nature, a little insect or a nymph that's swimming beneath the surface. Fish aren't stupid. They don't just blindly go for things because they understand that not everything is edible."

The trout in southern England's chalk streams are spoilt for choice with a smorgasbord of tasty morsels to tempt



Fishing flies made from a microfibre mop are being introduced to Britain but not all anglers are happy

showed no interest whatsoever.

As soon as he switched to a brown mop fly there was a flurry of activity like the piranha scene from a horror film.

On the first cast he landed a 2½lb wild brown trout. The fish was swiftly unhooked and released.

The decision on whether to permit the use of mop flies, which are already on their way to the UK, will be left to individual fisheries and competition organisers. Andreas Topintzis, general manager of the Salisbury and District Angling Club, has already said that he is opposed to their use.

Mark Bowler, editor of *Fly Fishing and Fly Tying* magazine, said: "If it is a miracle fly and you catch a fish every time you might think 'Do I really want to use a mop fly?'"

them. The mop fly may look like a bit of deceased earthworm floating downstream, although Mr Cooper, the author of *Life of a Chalk-stream*, said: "I think there's more to it than that. Other flies either float on the surface or beneath it, but the mop fly gets saturated and may move differently in the water and that attracts the trout's attention."

One thing for certain is that it works. Mr Cooper has tried four mop flies brought over from America by a friend. Standing up to his thighs in the Test, he deftly cast at least 20 times using a traditional dry fly. Several large trout swimming lazily just below the surface

Flying in face of tradition

Nowhere are the traditions of fly-fishing more jealously guarded than along the chalk streams of southern England. Nearly a century ago the sport, which was developed on rivers such as the Test and the Itchen, was riven by a controversy besides which the row over the mop fly is insignificant.

Edwardian gentlemen used dry flies to imitate insects that sat on the surface of the water. Then George Edward MacKenzie Skues, a



lawyer and keen fly fisherman, invented the "wet" fly. This imitated the insect nymphs that lived in the river and formed 90 per cent of a trout diet. There was uproar. Use of wet flies was condemned as

unsporting but, despite resistance from traditionalists, more fish are caught using them than dry flies.

Use of lures that look like small fish or maggots is still considered unsporting and is banned in most if not all fisheries.

Other innovations that have met with resistance from more traditional anglers in the world of coarse fishing include underwater cameras, electronic "fish detectors" and bait boats.