

BAMBOO

NICK TARANSKY

Nick describes his path to split cane rods and rod-making.

Making bamboo rods (and fishing with them) seems to be enjoying quite a renaissance in Australia. In this column I will try to keep readers up to date on a whole range of subjects relating to bamboo. These will include rod-making resources such as books, DVDs and websites; where to source rods; styles and types of tapers; rod-makers (past and present), rod care, and tips for fishing with bamboo.

Beginnings

Perhaps the best place to start is how I got into bamboo myself and what it means to me.

My first fly rod was a three-piece, split cane 5 weight, in an orange nylon bag, which I bought from an Adelaide tackle store when I was a teenager. The ferrules fell off and had to be re-attached, it had open glue lines, not to mention some interesting flex points and flat spots. It did, however, seem to cast a nice line (not that I had anything to compare it to) and I caught my first trout on fly with it on a Wickham's Fancy in Adelaide's Torrens Gorge.

That rod was left behind as I discovered fiberglass and then graphite, but before too long, South Australia's small bushy streams had me thinking again of bamboo. Meanwhile John Gierach's books like *Fishing Bamboo* also appealed to me, and soon I got hold of a little 6'3" Partridge of Redditch 4/5 weight cane rod. I used it for stream fishing until I started making my own rods.

Rod-making was never a planned thing for me. It came about from a chance meeting with one of the finest current American rod-makers, Jeff Wagner, at the Washington DC Fly Fishing Show. I ended up doing a course with Jim, and before too long bamboo rods began to take over my life.

After making rods in my spare time, I took long service leave from my job to fish and make more rods. I realised there wasn't room in my life for fishing, rod-making and a day job, and there was no way I was giving up fishing or rod-making! I quit my desk job and went full time. The idea was to be twice as happy, if half as well off financially. I guess it's a good thing that I'm four times as happy!



Why Bamboo?

This question probably has several answers ranging from the practical to the metaphysical. Most important to me is how well bamboo fishes in stream situations. At a technical level, the weight and natural flex in bamboo provides an inherent amount of rod loading, even with no line at all through the guides. This means that with little effort, and just the leader or a couple of feet of line out, the rod will ‘work’ and deliver a very accurate, delicate, short cast. In stream situations, this is where a lot of fish are caught.

As the length of cast increases, the line contributes to the rod loading. Bamboo retains its ‘sweet spot’ as the cast length increases from short to middle distance, the stiffness in the power fibres resisting the weight and natural flex of the material. At longer range, bamboo can still perform remarkably well, particularly if allowed to do the work without overpowering the casting stroke. The smooth, deep flex in bamboo also helps it to protect tippets on the strike, and during the playing of fish.

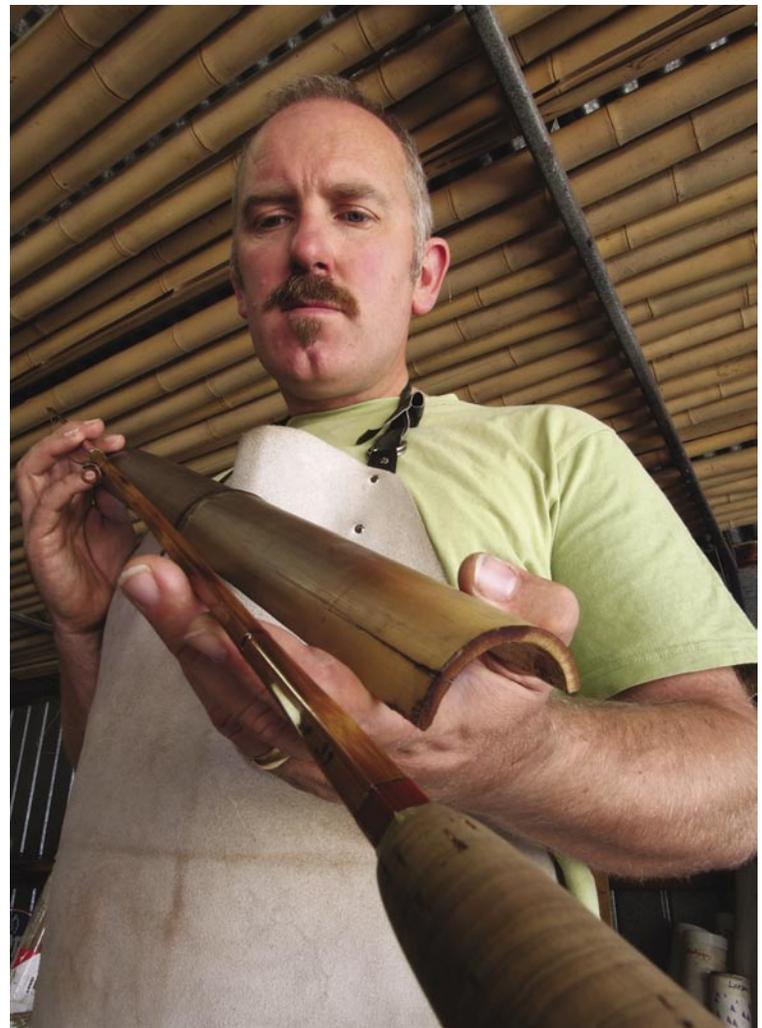
Tonkin Cane (used to make most bamboo rods) has great aesthetic appeal, with heat treating or flaming bringing out rich golds and browns, with blonde rods retaining a lemon straw colour. I still get the same excited feeling when the first coat of varnish goes on each new rod, revealing the intense colour and natural pattern of the power fibres in each strip, with splashes of contrasting yellow at the nodes.

The People

One of the other great things about getting into bamboo is connecting with people. When I hold a rod I’ve made, I think of its origins. There are the unknown Chinese women and men who grow and harvest the bamboo in the Kwantung province. Andy Royer, from ‘The Bamboo Broker’ in Seattle, who gets it around the world to me. Bailey Wood, who with his stepson Steve at Classic Sporting Enterprises in Vermont, make the industry-standard nickel silver ferrules and other rod-making components. I love that Bailey is too busy working to set up an internet account, so I usually phone him to place an order. This can result in a conversation which at my end focuses on drought and forty degree heat, while at the other end the problems are streams freezing solid, two metres of snow, and cutting up moose road-kill into steaks.

Then there’s Mike and Susan McCoy, who fashion exquisite agate insert stripping guides in Washington, and of course, Jeff Wagner, who got me started on the rod-making craft and provided me with the best tools and other components. I musn’t overlook Bob Corsetti, who along with a few hardcore fishing mates in New Hampshire, bench-make fine Peerless fly reels one at a time. And of course Terenzio Zandri or Mike and Susan Winter, whose handcrafted lines often complete the picture at the mug’s end of the rod.

All these people fish too, and make a living from craftsmanship and the quest for quality. How they all contribute to a bamboo rod, makes for a nice kind of globalisation. There’s something downright exotic about a rod which can claim such an international mix of materials and workmanship: bamboo - China, cork - Portugal, nickel silver hardware - USA, wrapping silk - Japan, agate - Brazil, burl spacer (and labour!) - Australia. Put on an English Hardy reel,



loaded with a French or Italian silk line, and you just about have the UN of flyfishing.

Rod-makers and Rod-making

Meeting other rod-makers and enthusiasts is rewarding too. The annual Victorian Fly-Fisher’s Association Cane Day has been running for several years now, and the Inaugural NSW Rod-makers Gathering was held at Bowral in September 2008, thanks to Callum Ross.

Every time you think you know everyone else who is making rods, another person pops up with a handful of wonderful rods they’ve been making in their garage. It’s a joy to see and cast another’s efforts, and to share ideas and information.

While there is quite a bit of work in making a rod—normally around 50 to 60 hours (and probably at least twice that for your first one)—it is very much a one-step-at-a-time process, and anyone thinking about trying it shouldn’t be scared of giving it a go. One nice thing about making your own rods is how you can play around with designs and tapers. By and large, the classic tapers have become just that for a reason. Master rod-makers have developed them after many years of trial and error, scientific design, and—most importantly—fishing. It is interesting though, to modify these tapers or come up with your own, particularly when considering Australian conditions. Though our waters obviously share common features with streams around the world, I like to think Australian fishing has its

own character. In my adopted home region, the Snowy Mountains/Monaro, the waters are generally small, maybe like parts of the American East, but our high plains often mean high winds, more like the American West. A lot of streams are overgrown with bankside vegetation, in stark contrast with manicured chalkstreams in Europe. These factors, along with individual casting styles, leave plenty of scope for trying different bamboo tapers.

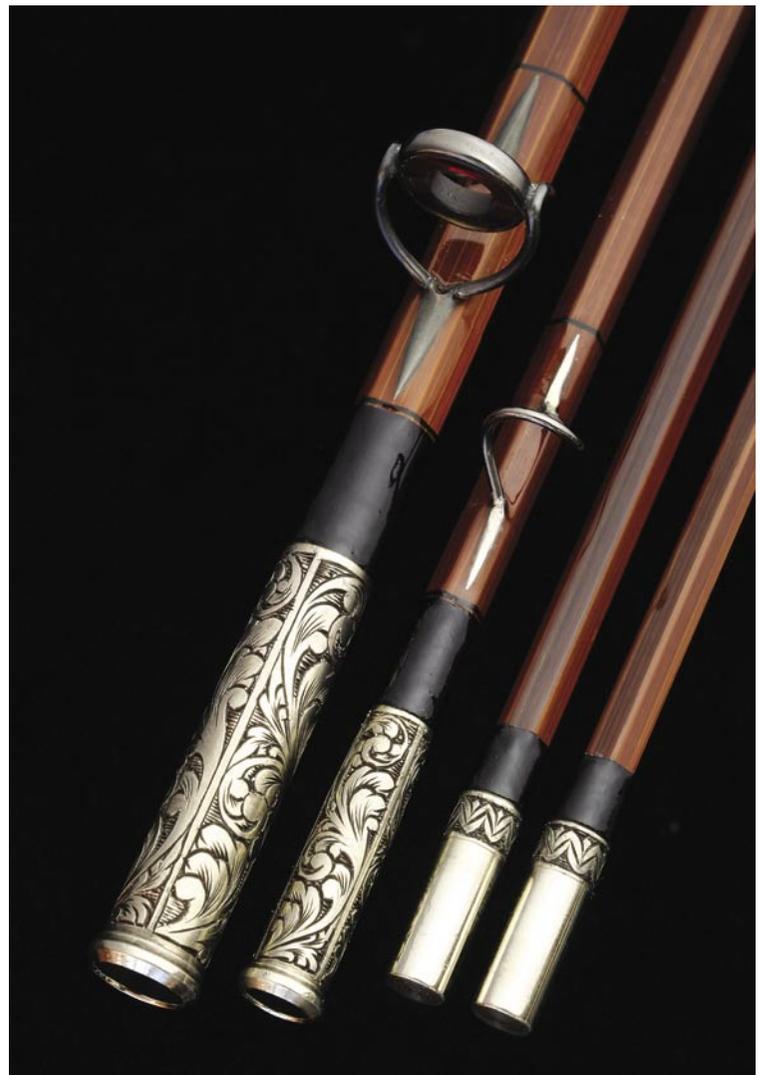
Having the input of people like my fishing mentor and long time Snowy Mountains guide, Paul Bourne, and master caster Peter Hayes, is invaluable to my rod-making. Paul is the most passionate, hardcore, knowledgeable stream fisherman I have met, having fished widely in Tasmania and New Zealand, as well as the Snowy Monaro area. Haysie's casting and teaching ability is exceptional, and the continual expansion of his own understanding of casting styles gives plenty of food for thought about what makes a good casting rod.

The History

Bamboo and its connection to angling history and tradition, appeals to a lot of people. These days, when the latest computers and mobile phone models become obsolete around the time you learn how to use them, it's comforting to have a rod that is based on a design and taper close to a hundred years old. For me, I don't necessarily think things are good BECAUSE they're old or old style, but old stuff that's still around tends to be good or it wouldn't have lasted (I'm probably quoting or paraphrasing Gierach there).

I love making rods from new tapers (or more likely old tapers that I haven't tried yet), but for my own fishing, I would be happy just to use the first cane rod I made when learning from Jeff Wagner. The taper is a 7 foot, 4/5 weight that Jeff tweaked a bit from a classic Paul Young Driggs River Special. Smooth in close, it loads into the butt (the hand, actually) and has the kick to drive a Paul Bourne Hopper into a gale under a tight undercut bank. Having a rod you've fished

with a lot is similar to having an old pair of sandals which still have plenty of life left in them—though your partner may not think so. Over time, the shoes have moulded to fit your feet, and you barely notice you're wearing them. You're also pretty sure nothing else will probably ever fit quite as well.



Bamboo rod maker Nick Taransky lives in Queanbeyan, near the streams of the Monaro and Snowy Mountains. Visit www.taranskybamboo.com.au