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Wednesday, December 12, 2001

### Suzuki's VIEW

## Letting the big one get away

By [DAVID SUZUKI](#) -- CNEWS Science

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Fish is a staple menu item in restaurants across the North America - including cities far from the coast. It's even more important in developing countries.

Around the world, 80 million tonnes of fish are consumed every year, making up 16 per cent of our total animal protein intake. But we don't often consider where that fish comes from, or how (or if!) those fish stocks are being managed to prevent overfishing.

That's why a new study on catch rates is so troubling. For years, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the only organization to formally track international fish-catch data, has been reporting stable or increasing catch sizes. This information has pushed further investment in the fishing industry in many countries under the assumption that there are still plenty of fish in the seas.

But are there? Studies around the world in recent years have concluded that most major fish stocks are in trouble. And the FAO itself classifies more than 70 per cent of major marine fisheries as fully or over exploited. So how can these well-documented problems be reconciled with apparent increases in global fish catches?

The problem is that the FAO relies on member countries to provide catch data, and according to a new study published in the journal *Nature*, those data can be seriously misleading. The study, by Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly of

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the University of British Columbia, used more detailed information to reanalyze the FAO data and create a model of expected catch sizes. Their calculated numbers corresponded pretty well with catch sizes reported by most countries, with one key exception. China's reported harvest was double what the model predicted.

The researchers surmise that Chinese officials, until very recently, have been promoted according to production increases in their respective fields. For fisheries managers, that means catching more fish - or at least reporting that more fish were caught - even when catches may actually be declining. The Chinese fishery is one of the largest in the world, representing 15 per cent of total global harvest. If officials have been misrepresenting catch rates for more than a decade as is suspected, then global fish stocks have actually declined by 10 per cent since 1988.

Marine biologist Jane Lubchenco says that this declining global trend can only be halted with a drastic overhaul of fishery management. That will prove contentious, as some commercial and many recreational fisheries groups strongly oppose stricter conservation measures.

However, new evidence suggests that such measures are in the long-term best interests of all groups. For example, a study on marine reserves (areas where all fishing is prohibited) recently published in the journal *Science* found that these "underwater parks" can have a profound effect on neighboring fish stocks. The study, by an international team of marine scientists, found that the size of both commercial fish catches and recreational trophy fish catches off Florida and in the Caribbean greatly increased when small marine areas in the region were protected. In fact, near the island of St. Lucia, fish catches increased by up to 90 per cent in surrounding waters just five years after the creation of a protected area.

One of the key reasons for the success of the reserves is that they act as nurseries, offering a safe haven for fish to breed and grow to marketable and even

record sizes. A recent examination of more than 100 studies of such reserves around the world has found that creating them often leads to rapid increases in the abundance and size of commercial species, as well as an increase in

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species diversity.

Fish are an important source of protein and livelihood for people around the world. But with so much demand and so many boats plying the waters, the need for effective fisheries management has never been greater. Creating marine reserves is one tool towards that end. If we want to ensure a bountiful catch in the future, we have to give the fish a fighting chance today.

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