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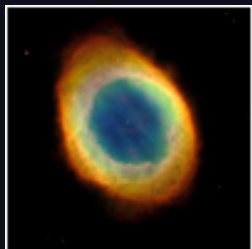
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SCIENCE NEWS



Global Fish Stock is Falling

November 29, 2001 8:00 CDT

A new model indicates that inaccurate reporting of fish catches has created a false impression that fish stocks are plentiful. Recalculation shows the global industry

and food supply to be in peril. In spite of evidence that fishing industries are over-exploiting the seas, fish stocks seem to be okay on a global level. Rising catch sizes are consistently reported by the single source of statistics, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Over-reporting of catches, notably by China, may have distorted the numbers and hence policy, say Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. They estimate that there has been an alarming decline in the size of fish catches since 1988. "The results are stunning," says marine biologist Jane Lubchenco of Oregon State University in Corvallis. "We're on a trajectory of significant decline," she says - which only a drastic overhaul of fishery management can stop.

Reduced stocks threaten the fishing industry and world food population. Fish make up about 17% of the world's animal protein and many developing countries rely on it. During the 1970s, fish ecologists predicted that catch figures would level off in the 1990s, says Andrew Rosenberg of the University of New Hampshire in Durham, when the biological capacity of the oceans was reached. Rosenberg was previously deputy director of the US National Marine Fisheries Service.

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The North Atlantic cod is among many fish stocks that have already taken a nosedive. The FAO currently estimates that 70% of major marine fisheries - industries based around a specific fish type or region - are fully or overexploited. The anomalously healthy catch statistics were conventionally put down to discovery of new stocks, Rosenberg says.

Watson and Pauly used FAO figures collected since the 1950s to construct a map of regional fish catches. They then were able to build a statistical model to predict catches based on factors like food abundance and water depth. The model accurately mirrors actual figures in most regions, and China shows the biggest discrepancy. China's reported catches, which make up 15% of the global harvest, are twice the recalculated figure. Local officials, whose promotion is linked to their ability to exceed production targets in China's socialist economy, may be responsible for the over-reporting, Pauly says. The central Chinese government placed a cap on the figures in 1998 in an attempt to prevent the practice.

The artificially high FAO figures have encouraged government investment in fisheries, which may have made the over-fishing problem even worse. International action to cut catch quotas and shrink fleets is important, the experts agree, to promote sustainable fishing. This means, for example, enforcing the currently non-binding FAO International Plan of Action for the Management of Fishing Capacity, says Rosenberg.

Source: Nature

Cosmiverse Staff Writer

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