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Fish catch figures fishy

CDNN - CYBER DIVER News Network

USA, Nov. 30 -- Inaccurate reporting of fish catches has created a false impression that fish stocks are plentiful, suggests a new model. Recalculation reveals a global industry and food supply in peril.

Despite local evidence that fishing industries are over-exploiting the seas, globally fish stocks look rosy. Rising catch sizes are consistently reported by the single source of statistics, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Over-reporting of catches, particularly 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 - one that only a drastic overhaul of fishery management can halt.

Dropping stocks threaten not only the fishing industry but world food production. Fish provide around 17% of the world's animal protein and many developing countries in particular rely on it.

Taking stock

In the 1970s, fish ecologists predicted catch figures would level off in the 1990s, explains 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.

Many fish stocks, such as the North Atlantic cod, have already crashed. The FAO currently deems nearly 70% of major marine fisheries - industries based around a particular fish type or region - fully or overexploited. The anomalously healthy catch statistics were conventionally put down to

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discovery of new stocks, explains Rosenberg.

From FAO figures collected since the 1950s, Watson and Pauly have constructed a map of regional fish catches. Using this, they built a statistical model to predict catches based on factors such as food abundance and water depth. The model accurately mirrors actual figures in most regions - China shows the biggest discrepancy.

China's reported catches, which account for 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, believes Pauly. 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 worsened over-fishing. International action to cut catch quotas and shrink fleets is required, the experts agree, to promote sustainable fishing. This means, for example, enforcing the currently nonbinding FAO International Plan of Action for the Management of Fishing Capacity, says Rosenberg. (Nature)

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