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China rejects report of masking catches

By Joe Mcdonald
Associated Press — Dec. 18, 2001

BEIJING — China on Tuesday, Dec. 18, rejected a report by Canadian researchers that it has over reported fishing catches, masking a decline in global fish stocks.

China's figures are "basically correct," the official Xinhua News Agency and newspapers quoted Yang Jian, director-general of the Agriculture Ministry's Bureau of Fisheries, as saying.

Canadian researchers said last month that China misreported fishing statistics in the 1990s. They said that made global catches appear to be rising by 700 million pounds a year, while they really fell by 800 million pounds.

The report raised serious concerns about forecasts of fish stocks and world food supplies.

Chinese officials are routinely accused, even by their own leaders, of inflating statistics. But Yang insisted that China's fishing reports conform to its statistics laws.

He questioned the way the researchers at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver carried out their study.

"Fishing in China has its own characteristics, so that foreign scientists' sampling patterns may not fit China," Xinhua quoted him as saying. "For example, people in other countries may not eat jellyfish and crab as regularly as the Chinese and the output of these two aquatic products account for a considerable portion of our total output."

China's fishing industry has grown rapidly over the past two decades, leading to fears that overfishing would deplete fish stocks. According to Yang, the number of fishing boats rose from 49,000 in 1980 to 280,000 last year.

China has reported declines in catches in some areas and imposed temporary fishing bans to let stocks recover.

In November, it announced a 3-month ban beginning in March on the Yangtze River, where it said annual catches of less than 100,000 tons are below one-quarter of 1950s levels.

This year, about 130,000 boats were idled at times by bans, Xinhua said. It said China plans to reduce its number of fishing boats by some 30,000 over the next five years.

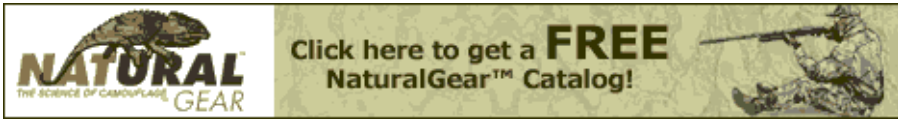
Yang said fishing was too small a part of China's economy for officials to have any incentive to exaggerate, the China Daily said.

That contradicted a statement last month by a spokesman from Yang's own ministry that a policy in effect until two years ago gave local officials promotions based on increases in fishing catches.

The research by Canadians Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly used computer projections to estimate what China's fishing catch should be, based on the amount of seafood caught in similar areas elsewhere.

Their conclusions cast doubt on global figures compiled by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The FAO relies on statistics submitted by governments, which until now had never undergone large-scale independent analysis.

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