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## **Over-reporting of global fisheries catch mean overfishing problems are worse than feared**

Certain countries have been submitting exaggerated fish catch claims to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), according to a study published in *Nature* on 29 Nov. China is accused of being a main culprit, accounting for 40% of the deviation between actual and reported claims.

Authorities on global fisheries have been suspicious of the relationship between failing fisheries and rising global catches; in 1996 the FAO reported that 60% of valuable fish species had been overfished, yet in the same year global catches were reportedly at an all time high of 87 million. Over reported marine catches would now seem to explain this anomaly, says *Nature*. This discovery has grave implications for the state of the oceans.

The real danger from such flawed data is that the seas have been subsequently mismanaged due to their perceived state. The inflated global fisheries catch statistics have allowed a less urgent approach to be taken to the overfishing problem, generating complacency among governments and a slackening in policy to alleviate the situation. Consequently, more species of fish have been marketed, new fishing areas have opened up and huge government subsidies to the industry have been allowed to continue – all creating the incentive and demand to overfish.

WWF apports blame of the state of the oceans to government subsidies, these subsidies make it economically viable to send bigger trawlers and more fleets out to fish – which is not so environmentally viable. WWF claim that today’s fishing fleet is estimated to be “two and a half times the capacity needed to sustainably fish the oceans”.

Dr. Daniel Pauly, the author of the *Nature* report, calls for “a stronger position” for the FAO when “negotiating the supply of accurate data from nations of the world” and that “those data must be evaluated”. As it stands, the FAO is the only body that maintains global fisheries statistics and the organisation has no means of independently verifying the catch reports.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has attempted to monitor government subsidies to the fishing industry which it says are “trade distorting, and undermine the sustainable use of fish resources”. However their ability to determine the truth from governments on their granting of subsidies is proven to be weak. In 1996, Japan claimed they donated a conservative US\$7 million to the industry, according to a WTO report. However, in the same year a World Bank report stated Japan had spent three-quarters of a billion dollars on fisheries subsidies. The means of monitoring and checking government claims on their contributions are unreliable and there is no legislation in place to hold governments accountable for the submission of flawed data, says the report.

Andy Rosenberg, Dean of the Colleges and Agriculture at the University of New Hampshire, warns, “It’s not a case of ‘lets gradually phase in some solutions.’ It’s rather more urgent than that.” Careful management is called for and regulations need to be adhered to as a repetition of the Canadian Grand Banks catastrophe is not a prospect that would be welcomed by many.

New research highlights marine reserves as a productive way of replenishing fisheries according to a recent report in the magazine *Science*, this month. Whatever plans are made in the future to maintain fish stocks it is imperative that the overseeing bodies have means at their disposal to verify the information they receive and ways of enforcing their laws.

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