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NRDC Calls for Prompt Ratification and Implementation of International Fishing Treaty; Citing New Study of Worldwide Fisheries Decline

Statement of Lisa Speer, NRDC Senior Policy Analyst

NEW YORK (November 28, 2001) - In a new study published in the November 29 issue of *Nature*, two leading scientists present dramatic evidence that world fisheries have been declining steadily since the late 1980's. The new study raises serious concerns about the health of the world's oceans and the global food fish supply, and highlights urgency of prompt action to halt the decline.

This study's alarming findings should sound a wake-up call to fisheries managers everywhere. FAO's statistics have fostered false complacency. Conservation is needed now.

The new study by Dr. Daniel Pauly and Dr. Reg Watson, both with the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre, has found that catch statistics collected by FAO have been significantly inflated -- principally by China -- leading to an unjustified confidence in the general health of fisheries.

The study's findings contrast sharply with statistics compiled by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which has reported stable catches over the last decade. FAO relies on catch reports from different countries to determine the overall health of fisheries around the world, but does not independently verify the catches reported to it.

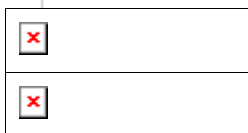
A key opportunity to advance fisheries conservation is an international treaty designed to improve conservation and management of high seas fisheries that is due to take effect December 11, 2001. When fully implemented, the UN Fish Stocks Agreement will end the free-for-all on the high seas that has contributed to over fishing of many important species, including swordfish in the Atlantic, types of tuna, cod stocks, and other popular fish.

The treaty requires ratifying nations to reduce over fishing, address the enormous waste in global fisheries (an estimated one quarter of the world catch is discarded, mostly dead), and accurately report catches, among other things. The United States has ratified the treaty, but other major fishing nations -- China, Japan, the European Union, and others -- have not.

The UN treaty holds major promise for helping to reverse the decline in world fisheries. Those nations that have not ratified should do so immediately; those that have should implement the treaty's conservation provisions as soon as possible.

Although the treaty's provisions apply only to fish that occur both in domestic and international waters, these fish include some of the world's most economically and ecologically valuable stocks. The treaty also sets an important precedent for management of other fisheries within the waters of individual nations.

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Over fishing is a pervasive problem globally and in the U.S. Roughly half of assessed U.S. fish populations are considered over fished or approaching that condition by the federal government. Congress needs to strengthen the law to end over fishing, protect habitats, stop wasteful fishing practices, and restore fish populations.

The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, non-profit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has more than 500,000 members nationwide, served from offices in New York, Washington, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

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