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Crisis in world fish stocks

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Paris - The crisis in world fish stocks is far worse than previously thought, according to Canadian experts who say bogus statistics submitted by China are to blame for causing a distorted picture.

Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver trawled through figures compiled by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the only agency which provides a global picture on fish stocks.

The FAO, whose statistics come from national governments, reported that global catches were around 80 million tonnes at the start of the 1990s and generally rose throughout the 1990s.

That gave a somewhat optimistic view about the state of fish stocks, suggesting they were more resilient than thought, despite scientific warnings of the perils of over-fishing and the collapse of fisheries in the North Atlantic, Mediterranean and Southeast Pacific.

Watson and Pauly, reporting their research on Thursday in the British weekly Nature, say the problem lay with Chinese figures.

Throughout the decade, Beijing reported that its fish catches were rising.

This defied evidence that Chinese coastal waters had all been fished out and that China's claimed catches in international waters were abnormally high for fishing at such depths and latitudes, the experts say.

The suspected reason: local Chinese officials, eager to show the central government that they had met targets for fish catches, deliberately exaggerated the catch.

Since 1999, Beijing - apparently aware of the over-reporting problem - has discreetly started to submit "more realistic" figures, suggesting stable rather than rising catches.

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If these statistics are credible, they suggest that the FAO's global catch, far from increasing by 330 000 tonnes per year since 1988 has in fact slumped by 360 000 tonnes, say Watson and Pauly.

The pair blast the FAO's statistics as being untrustworthy and failing to take into account the temptation of fishermen to under-report their catch.

"There is a clear need to act," they say, attacking a culture of "complacency" among international agencies.

"The oceans should continue to provide for a substantial portion of the world's protein needs. The present trends of overfishing, wide-scale disruption of coastal habitats and the rapid expansion of non-sustainable (fish farms), however, threaten the world's food security." - AFP

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