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Global supply of seafood in question

Scientists doubt the accuracy of FAO's fisheries statistics

Researchers at the University of British Columbia are questioning the accuracy of global fisheries statistics compiled by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization.

China's overreporting of its fish harvests is inflating the global seafood supply and compromising the effective management of the world's fisheries, say Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly, authors of a study published in the Nov. 29 issue of the journal *Nature*.

Using a statistical model, researchers discovered that China's catches in recent years were unrealistically high when compared to catches from other regions of the world with similar oceanic characteristics, such as temperature and depth.

The statistical model predicted that in 1999 China harvested 5.5 million tons of fish from its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), 4.6 million tons less than it reported.

Consequently, the 1999 global catch totaled 79.2 million tons, not 83.8 million tons as reported by the FAO.

Furthermore, by subtracting from the equation the number for Peruvian anchoveta, a species that fluctuates drastically due to El Niño weather conditions and is used only for fish meal, the 1999 global catch fell another 8.7 million tons, to 70.5 million tons.

Global seafood catches declined steadily in the 1990s when these two factors are taken into account, say researchers. The FAO says global catches increased gradually in the 1990s.

The study will likely put more pressure on the FAO to strengthen its information-gathering methods, says analyst Howard Johnson, who uses the FAO's global fisheries statistics in his annual report on the U.S. seafood industry.

Still, the FAO, the only organization that compiles global fisheries statistics, provides useful trends, adds Johnson.

"I've been to other countries and I've seen how they fish. There's no way to be completely accurate, I think," he says.

China has admitted that its fisheries managers were promoted based on production increases, giving them an incentive to exaggerate catches.

In 1998, China addressed overreporting by adopting a zero-growth policy capping the overall annual catch, which includes catches from areas beyond the country's EEZ, at 15.3 million tons.

China's annual catch will remain at the same level — 15.3 million tons — for

the next few years. Although well intentioned, the country's actions do not inspire confidence in the accuracy of the FAO's global fisheries statistics, say researchers.

— STEVEN HEDLUND

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