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Under-reporting of fish catches in Pacific

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Samisoni Pareti - Islandsbusiness.com

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Fort Lauderdale, Florida -- Islands of the Pacific are under-reporting their catches of fish annually, preliminary results of a study by Canadian scientists show. "Between 1950 to 2004, total catch figures in 15 of the 20 Pacific Island countries were at least two times higher than those reported to the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO)," Dr Dirk Zeller one of the scientists who did the study told islandsbusiness.com and journalists covering the 11th International Coral Reef Symposium underway in this US city. "We expect the figure to increase once we do a follow up study in the Pacific." The problem Dr Zeller said is the non-inclusion of catches from subsistence fishery, which is the source of livelihood for many of the people in the Pacific. Because such fishing is for domestic use, many government planners exclude subsistence or coral reef fishery from the total catch data they send the United Nations' FAO each year.

The problem the Canadian scientist said is compounded by the current practice of having Foreign Affairs ministries or Customs dispatch the figures to the UN agency, and not the Fisheries ministry. "In American Samoa for example, actual catches were 17 times higher than the reported data. In Guam, it was 4 1/2 times higher. "In Hawaii, catches in recreational fishing (mainly related to its billion dollar tourism industry) were not reported until just recently. "But recreational fishing catches as much as the commercial fisheries sector." Dr Zeller is a marine scientist with the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and he did the recent study with colleagues Dr Daniel Pauly and Jennifer Jacquet. Jacquet not only looked at annual catch figures in Fiji and Solomon Islands but she also toured East Africa with the countries of Mozambique and Tanzania. Dr Zeller did add that Fiji, out of all the countries in the Pacific, was an exception as it includes coral reef fishery catches in the total catch figure it submits to FAO.

He said the island nation made the change as a result of at least two studies done in the early 1990s and again in 2000. His colleague Dr Pauly said subsistence fishing catches ought to be included in the annual catch figures since it supports millions of people. "So you have a situation where when planning policy, governments make the wrong decisions because they are not taking into account this very important sector," said Dr Pauly. Governments, the scientists say, must also be aware of the implications of subsistence fishery to food security. Higher prices of imported food will force more and more people to resort to coral reef fishing, thus the importance of including subsistence fishing catches in their planning. Jacquet said her study in east Africa showed that women and children are the main players in subsistence fishing. The Canadian scientist was critical though of the fishing agreements some African countries had entered into with the European Union that had allowed fishing boats into coastal waters to trawl for shrimps. The deal Jacquet said had only led to the reversal of the role of the proverbial Robin Hood character who is now "stealing from the poor to

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