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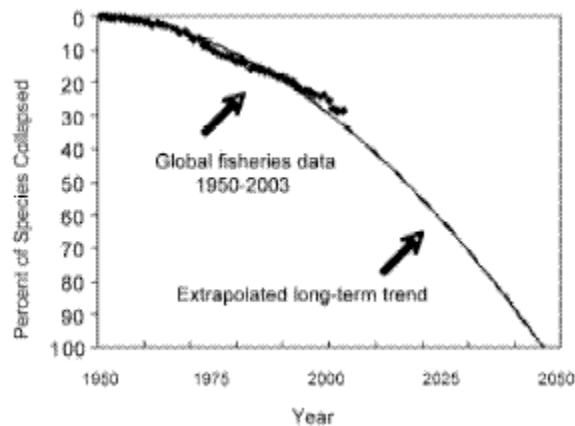
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Fish catches declining faster than realised

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Fish catches are declining around the world faster than had previously been realised, claims the Vancouver-based Sea Around Us Project, which assesses the impact of fisheries on the world's marine ecosystems. The available statistics are not telling the real story, they have found. Contributing Editor *Henrylito Tacio* reports from the 11th International Coral Reef Symposium, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

The reason for this is that global fish catch are primarily tracked in the context of trade. Most of the data collected are for tuna, shrimp, lobster and other luxury commodities and excluded those mostly eaten by people and those harvested within three miles of the coasts.



Global loss of seafood species. Shown is the current trend in fisheries collapses, and extrapolated to 2050.

As a result, there is underreporting of data submitted to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) from all over the world. This was the findings of the new study released by the project during the Symposium.

The costs of fishery collapses – foregone revenue, lost jobs and depleted biodiversity – is extremely high. For instance, up to 1998, the Atlantic cod collapse cost at least US\$6 billion, plus incalculable losses to biodiversity, lifestyle and culture.

Profound changes in fisheries management policies are required to reverse these trends, the scientists say. Submitting correct statistics on the real status of the fishing industry in every country is good starting point.

Global problem

"We discovered one nation underreporting its fisheries catches and then realised that this wasn't an isolated case but a problem globally," said Dr. Daniel Pauly, the project's principal research investigator. "Everywhere we look, the number of fish being taken from reefs is greater than reported."

The study investigated and reconstructed the actual catches from 1950-2004 for twenty small island countries in tropical Pacific. "The unreported catches were as great as reported catches, and in some cases were nearly 17 times higher than reported catches," say the project authors in a press statement.

Catch reconstruction was done by Dr. Dirk Zeller with the help from researcher Jennifer Jacquet. They found out that the trend for domestic catches in some Pacific island nations "has been declining by between 54 per cent and 86 per cent since 1950."

"This decrease is likely due to localized overfishing near major population centers brought on by increasing population rates and by changing diet preferences," they say.

Ms. Jacquet also cited the case of underreporting in Africa. In Mozambique, catch reconstruction revealed that fish catches were more than six times greater than reported data. In Tanzania, catches in Zanzibar (an island off the coast) were not included which accounted for 30 per cent of the country's total catches.

Small-scale tropical fisheries are culturally important and provide a secure source of protein for most people living in developing countries. More often than not, reliable yearly estimates of catches in these countries are hard to come by, which could explain why catch accounting by most of these countries is incomplete.

"Given the increasing stresses of climate change and overfishing, however, countrywide estimates of total catches need to become an even greater priority," the press statement says.

"It's important to know the complete picture when we talk about how many fish are taken every year from the oceans," explained Dr. Zeller, a research fellow with the project's research division. "Since we're finding that small-scale fisheries are greater contributors to overall catches than we previously thought, we need to more closely monitor commercial overfishing so that coastal communities around the globe have the income and food sources that they need."

For further details, visit www.seaaroundus.org



Herring fishing in the Baltic Sea.

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