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AS the United Nations meets to discuss the state of high seas fisheries management, two independent, peer-reviewed studies reveal that ineffective international management is undermining the future of high seas fisheries, fish populations and the health of marine ecosystems.

One study—published online by the journal Science—finds that governments have been ineffective in stopping illegal fishing. The Pew Environment Group, which prepared this first-ever comprehensive report on the topic, reached that conclusion by evaluating government actions regarding documented vessels, known to fish illegally, that enter ports with fish from the high seas.

The second study—published online in the journal Marine Policy—is the first to evaluate 18 regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs), the intergovernmental bodies tasked with managing fishing on the high seas. The study showed that the RFMOs have failed to halt dramatic declines of fish stocks.

The Pew study focused on the role that Port States can play in combating illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Port States can significantly reduce the profitability of vessels engaged in IUU fishing by denying entry, the landing of fish or port services. The study assessed how well Port States complied with measures adopted by eight RFMOs and directed against vessels found to carry out or support IUU fishing over the last six years. The analysis of port visits made by vessels showed that

- Insufficient or out-of-date data made identifying illegal vessels difficult
- For those Port State governments under obligation to implement measures against illegal vessels, these obligations were fulfilled in only one out of every four cases; and
- Illegal vessels can avoid sanctions by escaping to another region, due to the lack of global consistency in Port State measures

Our research shows that the current system leaves significant loopholes for those engaging in IUU fishing to exploit," said Kristin von Kistowski, a senior advisor to the Pew Environment Group who manages the Port State Performance research project. "To fix the worldwide problem of IUU fishing, we need a system with much more transparency, accountability and global coordination.

Previous research found that IUU fishing caught an estimated 11 to 26 million tons of fish, worth as much as \$23.5 billion annually and the equivalent of about one-fifth of the global reported catch.

The study in Marine Policy, from University of British Columbia researchers Sarika Cullis-Suzuki and Dr. Daniel Pauly, is the first to quantitatively score the performance of 18 RFMOs to determine how well they manage high seas fisheries "on paper" versus "in practice." The scientists found that two-thirds of the commercial fish stocks under RFMO management are either severely depleted or overfished. Their results show that RFMOs are not meeting best practice standards and are failing to halt declines.

We found that many RFMOs lack a general commitment to set and implement conservation measures to keep fish populations at sustainable levels," said Cullis-Suzuki. "Even if the mandate of an RFMO emphasized conserving fish stocks, the end result often did not reflect that conservation goal. We concluded that RFMOs need to be more accountable and take steps toward improving management if they want to fulfill their mandates.

Both studies were presented in conjunction with this week's United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA) Review Conference. This is the first meeting related to high seas fisheries since the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) rejected measures to limit or halt trade of depleted shark and bluefin tuna populations. At the CITES meeting in Doha, Qatar in March, delegates claimed that RFMOs have the responsibility for stopping the decline of these species. However, the assessments presented today called into question the RFMOs' ability to successfully manage high seas fisheries.

Healthy fish populations are critical to the future of our oceans and provide food security for billions of people around the world," said Dr. Susan Lieberman, International Policy director for the Pew Environment Group. "The people of the world, particularly in developing countries, need the United Nations and member governments of the U.N. Fish Stocks Agreement to take bold action to end illegal fishing and properly manage fisheries.

The UNFSA Review Conference is being held May 24-28, 2010 at U.N. Headquarters in New York.