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Arctic fishing grossly underreported: report

By CBC News
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Nearly a million tonnes of fish were caught in the Arctic over the past half-century, despite the fact that less than 13,000 tonnes were reported to the United Nations, B.C. researchers report.

"Ineffective reporting, due to governance issues and a lack of credible data on small-scale fisheries, has given us a false sense of comfort that the Arctic is still a pristine frontier when it comes to fisheries," said Dirk Zeller, the lead author of the report on the research findings, in a statement.

"We now offer a more accurate baseline against which we can monitor changes in fish catches and to inform policy and conservation efforts."

The study, published this week in the journal *Polar Biology*, estimated that fisheries catches in Russian, Canadian and U.S. Arctic waters totalled 950,000 tonnes from 1950 to 2006 - nearly 75 times more than 12,700 tonnes reported to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

Zeller and his colleagues at the UBC Fisheries Centre and the university's department of ocean sciences arrived at their own estimates by reconstructing catch data from sources such as governmental reports and anthropological records of activities by indigenous populations.

Daniel Pauly, who led the research team, said no one has ever before compiled catch data from individual Arctic communities.

"It would be stated that the fishery's in good shape and stuff, and that could be true, [but] actually I don't know that. The picture of the overall catch and the catch by year, in the various communities, does not exist," Pauly told CBC News on Friday.

Pauly described the situation as a puzzle in which "you have the pieces all over the place in a bag, but it's never been put together."

For example, statistics from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game showed that over the study period, the Arctic fish catch in Alaska alone was 89,000 tonnes, even though the U.S. reported no catches at all to the UN.

The UN numbers were based only on Russian reports, but the UBC study suggests even those numbers were a gross underestimate. It pegged Russia's actual catch at 770,000 tonnes.

Canada's catch during the study period was estimated at 95,000 tonnes.

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