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Arctic fish catch vastly underreported (by hundreds of thousands of metric tons) for 5 decades

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February 07, 2011

From 1950 to 2006 the United Nation Food and Agriculture Agency (FAO) estimated that 12,700 metric tons of fish were caught in the Arctic, giving the impression that the Arctic was a still-pristine ecosystem, remaining underexploited by the world's fisheries. However, a recent study by the University of British Columbia Fisheries Center and Department of Earth and Ocean Sciences throws cold water on this widespread belief. According to the study, published in *Polar Biology*, the total Arctic catch from 1950 to 2006 is likely to have been nearly a million metric tons, almost 75 times the FAO's official record.

"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," explains lead author Dirk Zeller, a senior research fellow at University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre, in a press release. "We now offer a more accurate baseline against which we can monitor changes in fish catches and to inform policy and conservation efforts."

Decades of lack of transparency have created the vast difference between the FAO official numbers and the study's findings. Although Arctic fisheries spread over three countries: the US, Russia, and Canada. FAO received fisheries data only from Russia totaling 12,700 metric tons over 56 years of fishing. However, by compiling available government reports, records from indigenous communities, and anthropological records the study was able to show that Russia's was in fact heavily fishing its northern waters, catching some 770,000 metric tons.

While the US National Marine Fisheries Service's Alaska branch reports zero catches to the FAO in the Arctic, data from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game shows that the catch is actually around 89,000 metric tons. Canada also reports a zero catch to the FAO, but likely catches some 94,000 metric tons in the Arctic.

"Our work shows a lack of care by the Canadian, U.S. and Russian governments in trying to understand the food needs and fish catches of northern communities," says renowned fisheries expert Daniel Pauly, leader of the Sea Around Us Project at University of British Columbia, which has been studying the impact of fisheries on marine ecology for over a decade.

Researchers argue such underreporting threatens the web of life making up the Arctic ecosystem, which is already gravely imperiled by climate change impacts, including sea ice loss. This January was the lowest ice extent on record for the month.

"Conservation efforts in the Arctic have so far focused on the exploitation of marine mammals—seals and polar bears are frankly easy on the eye and plain to see," explains Zeller. "None of them would survive. however. if we allow

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over-exploitation of fish in this delicate but so-far neglected ecosystem."

CITATION: D. Zeller, S. Booth, E. Pakhomov, W. Swartz and D. Pauly. Arctic fisheries catches in Russia, USA, and Canada: baselines for neglected ecosystems. Polar Biology. DOI: 10.1007/s00300-010-0952-3.