

News code: SPH - 09_ARCTIC FISH.txt News date: Sunday, February 6, 2011



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Researchers warn Arctic fishing under-reported

VANCOUVER (Reuters) — The amount of fish caught in the Arctic has been dramatically under-reported for decades, making the northern ocean environment appear far more pristine than it really is, according to a new study.

An estimated 950,000 tons of fish were caught in Russian, Canadian and U.S. Arctic waters between 1950 and 2006, which is 75 times higher than reported by the United Nation's agency that records catch levels, according to Canadian researchers.

Ineffective reporting "has given us a false sense of comfort that the Arctic is still a pristine frontier when it comes to fisheries," lead researcher Dirk Zeller of the University of British Columbia said in a written statement.

The results of the study were published this week in the journal Polar Biology.

The researchers said they collected data on fish catches from a variety of sources in the region, including those kept by indigenous people, and compared it to what was reported to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.

The researchers estimate that, between 1950 and 2006, 89,000 tons of fish were caught in Alaskan coastal waters in the Arctic and 94,000 tons in Canadian waters, but neither Canada nor the United States supplied that data to the UN.

An estimated 770,000 tons of fish were caught in Russian waters off Siberia, far above the 12,700 tons reported by the United Nations, according to the study.

The researchers said that most Arctic conservation efforts concentrate on protecting animal such as seals and polar bears, and they warned that the marine mammals will not survive if the rest of the region's ecosystem is neglected.

The researchers said the problems could become worse if climate change pushes more fish into polar waters and melting sea ice allows greater access by the world's fishing fleets.



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