

Canadian researchers question amount of Arctic catch

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By ALASKA NEWSPAPERS STAFF

There's a lot more than climate change going on in Arctic fisheries, according to a new report from the University of British Columbia.

In fact, says the team led by Professor Daniel Paul of UBC's Fisheries Centre and Department of Earth and Ocean Sciences, fish catches in the Arctic totaled 950,000 tons from 1950 through 2006, compared to the 12,700 tons reported by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

That FAO data was based solely on statistics from Russia, which reported the harvest of 12,700 tons. The area of concern is the FAO's Fisheries Statistical Area 18, which covers arctic coastal areas in Northern Siberia, Alaska's Arctic and the Canadian Arctic.

The UBC researchers compiled limited government reports, plus anthropological records of indigenous population activities as part of their effort. They released their report yesterday. Researchers noted that with sea ice declining due to climate change issues are being raised about loss of biodiversity plus the expansion of industrial fishing into this area.

"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, a senior research fellow at the university's Fisheries Centre. "We now offer a more accurate baseline against which we can monitor changes in fish catches and to inform policy and conservation efforts."

The team report shows that while the Alaska branch of the National Marine Fisheries Service reports no catches for the Arctic area, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game used commercial data and has undertaken studies on 15 coastal communities where fisheries is relied on for subsistence. The estimated fish catch in Alaska long for this period totaled 89,000 tons.

Similarly while Canada reported no harvests to the FAO, the research team found that commercial and small scale fishery harvests amounted to 94,000 tons for the same period.

"This research confirms that there is already fishing pressure in this region," Pauly said. "The question now is whether we should allow the further expansion of fisheries into the Arctic."

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