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China's overstatement masks decline in global fish stocks

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MARK COLVIN: How many fish in the seven seas? It is a proverbially impossible question, but now even the guesswork has got a whole lot harder.

Researchers in Canada say a fiddling of the figures by China has masked a global decline in fish stocks. The researchers say their model wants a global rethink of fisheries management and will even affect thinking about world food production.

Simon Lauder reports.

SIMON LAUDER: Counting the amount of fish in the sea is like counting the stars in the sky. You can't see them all but you'd probably notice if they started to disappear.

The United Nations estimates the amount of fish by taking figures from individual countries on how many fish have been caught. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), is given the figures annually on a voluntary basis.

Dr Reg Watson from the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre says the FAO's figures have long given the impression that the world's fish stocks have stayed at a consistent level, even rising slightly. Dr Watson says one of the problems is that the promotion of Chinese fisheries officials is linked to production targets.

DR REG WATSON: What we've seen is over reporting and in particular by one country we examined in detail which was China is equivalent to ... they've been increasing that every year in a linear fashion and basically what

that means is that they have been topping up what otherwise would be a clear decline in the world catches.

SIMON LAUDER: Why would China top the figures up like that?

REG WATSON: Well perhaps the best way to describe it is that China as a nation hasn't done this, but their statistical system encourages people to basically come up with better production figures than last year otherwise they won't get promoted and this has been well documented in some internal documents.

They've frustrated the Federal, the national level Government because these statistics which are added to each year get basically summarised and presented through the central government in Beijing, and those numbers have proven to be embarrassing because they've been growing by about 10 per cent a year since about 1988.

SIMON LAUDER: By making a map of regional fish catches and taking into account food abundance and water depth, Dr Watson and his partner at the University of British Columbia have found China's catch could be as low as 40 per cent of that reported to the UN.

With catch numbers showing a decline in all regions in the world except China, the global fishing industry has looked to the rosy global outlook for encouragement but with China's reported numbers accounting for about 18 per cent of the global total in the past, Dr Watson estimates the world figure should come down by at least 8 per cent. He says this calls for a major re-think by the industry.

REG WATSON: There has to be acknowledgment by fishing industry and by people who monitor the statistics like the FAO that basically the basis for us making decisions about the health of the world's ocean is quite weak. We don't have good information, it's supplied voluntarily and it's quite flawed and that the advice that's been going forth that the world's fisheries stock are healthy enough taken together even though they're failing locally has encouraged the development of large fleets in many places of the world.

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