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News Headline

**Catches from tropical island nations vastly underreported**

Tue, Aug 05, 2008

A new study released recently by the Sea Around Us Project reveals that fisheries catches from tropical island nations are vastly underreported. The investigation and reconstruction of actual catches from 1950-2004 for 20 small island countries in the tropical Pacific exposes that unreported catches were as great as reported catches, and in some cases were up to 17 times higher than reported catches.

Catch reconstructions, led by Dr. Dirk Zeller with help from researcher Jennifer Jacquet, show that the trend for domestic catches in some Pacific island nations has been declining by between 54 percent and 86 percent since 1950. This decrease is likely due to localized overfishing near major population centers brought on by increasing population rates and by changing diet preferences.

Small-scale tropical fisheries are culturally important and provide a secure source of protein for island nations. Reliable yearly estimates of catches in these remote island nations are expensive and difficult to obtain, which could explain why catch accounting by many countries is incomplete. Given the increasing stresses of climate change and overfishing, however, country-wide estimates of total catches need to become an even greater priority.

"It's important to know the complete picture when we talk about how many fish are taken every year from the oceans," said Dr. Zeller of the Sea Around Us Project. "Since we're finding that small-scale fisheries are greater contributors to overall catches than we previously thought, we need to more closely monitor commercial overfishing so that coastal communities around the globe have the income and food sources that they need"

The discrepancy between official national statistics (reported globally by the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization - FAO) and reconstructed total catches is primarily a result of consistent under-representation of subsistence and recreational catches in most countries.

When scientists account for subsistence fisheries in the catch totals since 1950, the results are dramatically different:

- In American Samoa, there is a 17-fold difference between official reported data and reconstructed total catches.
- Hawaii's unreported recreational fisheries for reef and deep-water bottom fish increased the total catch by almost four-fold.
- Reconstructed catches for Mozambique are more than six times greater than reported data.
- Tanzania is not reporting catches in Zanzibar (an island off the coast), which account for 30 percent of the country's total catches.

The underreporting of fisheries data – particularly by small-scale, subsistence fisheries – is a problem Dr. Daniel Pauly recognized more than a decade ago when he noticed the fish and shellfish caught by women and children in many countries were not being counted in official statistics. Many of these statistics, in turn, have incorrectly informed national and international policy and management.

"We discovered one nation underreporting its fisheries catches and then realized that this wasn't an isolated case but a problem globally," said Dr. Daniel Pauly, Principal Investigator of the Sea Around Us Project. "Everywhere we look, the number of fish being taken from reefs is greater than reported."

"As someone who has built much of his career on global fisheries data sets, this news is not only shocking but disheartening," continued Dr. Pauly. "Our previous conclusions about widespread overfishing must be amplified."

The Sea Around Us Project is developing a global total catch database to improve upon the officially reported FAO data by incorporating country-specific catch reconstructions. The aim of the database is to present likely total fisheries catches since 1950 to better inform management decisions pertaining to marine environments.

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