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Statistics on catches fishy, say scientists

By **CLAIRE MILLER**
 ENVIRONMENT REPORTER
 Friday 30 November 2001

Global fish catches have been falling steadily since the 1980s, indicating that the oceans are in a far worse state than realised, leading fisheries scientists say in *Nature* magazine.

They warn that the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation is relying on flawed data in its conclusion that the catch is stable. The scientists say this is leading to management and economic decisions based on unsustainable fishing rates.

No-take marine reserves are identified as a key element in sustaining fisheries in another study, published today in *Science* magazine.

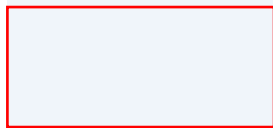
Researchers found that catches increased 46-90 per cent, depending on the gear used, in waters surrounding no-take reserves in Florida and St Lucia, in the Caribbean.

The State Government has proposed setting aside 5.2 per cent of Victoria's marine areas as no-take national parks. But the legislation is in limbo because of opposition demands that commercial fishermen be able to claim unrestricted compensation. '); document.write(' '); document.write(''); document.write('

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Victorian coordinator of the Marine and Coastal Community Network, Tim Allen, says Australia has not been immune from overfishing.

He says rock lobster catches have fallen 80 per cent since the 1950s, while greenlip abalone has not recovered from overfishing in the 1970s. School shark populations have also plummeted, he says.

In *Nature*, fisheries scientists Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly say global catch statistics are inflated by over-reporting from China and fluctuating catches of the Peruvian anchoveta. The figures create a false impression that business as usual is sustainable, they say.

Dr Watson and Dr Pauly say fisheries exploitation has dramatically increased over the past three decades, with more species marketed and new areas opening.

The scientists say the annual catch is expected to peak at around 80 million tonnes, but the Fisheries and Agriculture Organisation had reported bigger catches through the 1990s, based on unverified reports from member countries.

Dr Watson and Dr Pauly say the rise was largely driven by catch reports from China, where bureaucracies that monitor the economy are also responsible for output.

"Our studies showed that whatever leaders set as production targets is what is officially reported," Dr Pauly says. "If you dictate fisheries to increase by 5 per cent, then it is reported to increase by 5per cent."

Dr Pauly says the study reconciled local experience of failing fisheries with a global picture of falling catches. He says the inflated statistics have led to complacency.



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