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China's fishy figures belie state of world's oceans

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The dramatic decline in ocean fish catches since 1988 has been masked by misleading inflated reports, a study in the science journal *Nature* has revealed today.

During the 1990s, global seafood catches per year fell by 360 million kilos rather than increased by 315 million kilos, according to estimates from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), constituting a decline of more than 10 per cent of world stocks since 1988. Scientists at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, who carried out the research, accuse the FAO of creating complacency by using misleading statistics that belie the dire state of fish stocks and make it impossible to accurately assess the overfishing problem.

The huge discrepancy has been largely blamed on China, which is accountable for 40 per cent of the anomalies between reported and corrected figures. It is accused of submitting misleadingly large catch reports because its government had offered county and provincial officials job promotions based on growth in those figures. "The same state entities devoted to monitoring the economy are also tasked with increasing its output. Our studies showed that whatever leaders set as production targets is what is officially reported," said Daniel Pauly, co-author of the report.

A former president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Dr. Jane Lubchenco, told the oceans campaign group SeaWeb that the findings were highly significant. "They call into question the very basis of international fisheries management," she said.

The study predicts that the amount of seafood per person in 2015 will be half what it was in 1988, when supply was 15 kg per person per year. For some, the answer to the shortage lies in aquaculture, or fish farming, but the current trend is to raise carnivorous fish, such as salmon and shrimp, which are fed on fish caught in the wild. "If aquaculture is going to help the situation, you have to raise vegetarian fish (such as carp, tilapia and shellfish) and not supplement their food with fish means or oils," said Dr. Reg Watson, the report's other co-author.