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Overfishing could lead to future without fishermen

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The operating assumption for decades among marine biologists, fishery managers and policymakers has been that the world's catch of ocean fish has been rising and that fisheries were keeping pace with increased demand from a growing global population.

The assumption was based entirely on statistics gathered by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

It now appears this assumption is wrong.

In fact, as was recently reported in the science publication *Nature*, the opposite has been true.

The world's fish catch actually has been declining by about 800 million pounds a year since the late 1980s rather than increasing by 700 million pounds, as previously reported.

Not only are we exceeding the ocean's capacity to provide fish, but if current trends continue, within 20 or 30 years many of the world's commercial fisheries will be extinguished.

To compile its annual list of the world's fish catch, the FAO relies on numbers provided by countries.

For years these numbers showed that the world's catch was rising slowly. What the *Nature* study found, however, was that China was significantly over-reporting the size of its annual catch, making it appear the worldwide catch was going up.

The real Chinese figures, factored into the global figures, show that the fishery catch worldwide is going down because fewer fish were being caught each year - meaning that fish populations are not replenishing themselves.

Last century, the bulk of the world's fishing focused on species high in the food chain-tuna, cod, swordfish, hake and salmon.

Many of these fisheries, such as North Atlantic cod, are severely depleted. The loss of the cod fishery in New England and the Canadian Maritime Provinces provides a textbook example of fishery mismanagement.

The decline of this fishery, which resulted in the loss of thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars, was because of U.S. and Canadian government unwillingness to reduce fishing quotas in the face of scientific evidence that stocks were collapsing.

Fishing fleets worldwide now have focused on the more abundant species lower on the food chain - forage fish like capelin and menhaden, which are primarily used to feed chickens, pigs and other domestic animals. Now even these populations of smaller fish, which are critical to the marine food web, are declining.

The collapse of the world's fisheries is more than an environmental disaster.

More than 54 million people worldwide earn their living directly from fishing. Unless steps are taken soon to address the problem of over-fishing, a great many of these people will lose the livelihood upon which they and their families depend.

The implications for global food security are even more serious.

Fish provide 16 percent of the animal protein consumed by people worldwide, higher in many developing countries. In Asia, for example, fish represent 26 percent of the continent's animal protein intake. In Africa, it's 17 percent. (In North and Central America, by contrast, the figure is just 7 percent.)

At present rates, scientists project that by 2020 the per capita consumption of ocean fish will be half of what it was in 1988.

Significant reductions of such a crucial protein source from the diet of billions of people worldwide will exacerbate problems of malnutrition, disease and political unrest.

It's not too late. The correction of the FAO's numbers has sounded an alarm that we can no longer permit business as usual in the world's marine fisheries.

First, nations must stop subsidizing the fishing industry by propping up unprofitable fleets and encouraging the construction of new boats.

Second, nations must do a far better job of managing the fisheries under their jurisdiction.

Finally, there needs to be stricter international management regimes to ensure that over-fishing is curtailed, agreements are better enforced and greater cooperative efforts are made to stop pirate fishing in international waters.

The current absence of these types of international mechanisms is simply a blueprint for disaster.

Reduce fishing, or face a future with no fish or fishermen to catch them.

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