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Fisheries: Worldwide catches declining in spite of UN estimates --report

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The organization responsible for monitoring the world's fisheries has consistently overestimated the annual catch because China has vastly overreported the success of its fishermen, according to research published last week.

Contrary to United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization data that says the global fish catch increased by 330,000 tons a year since 1988, the catch trend has actually been declining by 360,000 tons per year, says a report published in the journal *Nature*. "The bottom line is that the downward trends in global fisheries catches have been obscured," said Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Center, a co-author of the study.

FAO's consistent overestimation of harvests has occurred because China, which has one of the largest fish catches in the world, provides incentives for its fisheries managers to overstate their take, says the study, "The Marine Fisheries of China: Development and Reported Catches." Using FAO's catch data and statistical analysis, the authors found that China is responsible for 40 percent of the difference between what is reported to FAO and what the actual catch is likely to be based on computer modeling.

"Many countries over- and underreport their catch statistics, but none has as big an impact as China," Pauly said. "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. If you dictate fisheries to increase by 5 percent then it is increased by 5 percent."

In compiling the global fisheries statistics, the FAO -- which is the only organization charged with that task -- uses only statistics reported by UN member nations, and it is not capable of independently verifying the accuracy of that data.

Some scientists and conservationists used the report to suggest that the newfound decline in fish catches translates to a decline in overall fish populations worldwide and warrants more stringent restrictions on fishermen. For Pauly, the findings provide justification for new measures to create new marine reserves.

"The United States should try to set up a protected area or risk losing its resources," he said. "You must reduce the pressure on stocks, and you can't reduce the pressure sufficiently unless you set aside large areas as reserves."

Gerald Leape of the National Environmental Trust agreed that the report provides an incentive for U.S. lawmakers to increase fisheries protection and monitoring. "We hope the regulators sit up and take notice," he said. "We hope they act on the solutions that are being offered."

Representatives of the commercial fishing industry, however, say there is no justification for concluding that lower catches translate to declining fish stocks or indicate overfishing.

"The health of a fish stock cannot be determined solely from landings," said Justin LeBlanc of the National Fisheries Institute. "Arguably, here in the U.S., landings have declined to prevent overfishing and to rebuild overfished stocks. If you look at the New England groundfish fishery, the landings are down dramatically, and that's a good thing, because those decreased landings are a management tool for restoring the fishery."

And even if certain fisheries really are declining, there is no reason to blame the declines on overfishing and implement more rigid restrictions, LeBlanc said. "The problem is, you can't imply that declining landings are only or absolutely the result of overfishing. There are a number of natural reasons why you could get declines in a properly managed fishery. Pollution, development and other factors including natural population fluctuations can affect abundance regardless of fishing activity."

Pauly admitted there was no way he could prove the declining catches translate into declining fish stocks, but he said he found it difficult to believe otherwise. "The industry will say that catch is declining because people are not fishing as much. If you believe that, you also believe in Santa Clause."

Responding to the report, an FAO official in Rome said the findings of overreporting are nothing new. But he took issue with the assumption the new data indicates world fisheries are in trouble and wide-scale management overhauls are needed.

"If the discrepancies are real, the implications for sustainability are mainly for China's coastal fishery resources and to a lesser extent for shared resources in the Northwest Pacific region," said Richard Grainger, FAO's chief of fishery information. "To suggest that any overreporting in the case of China would impact perspectives of fishery resources worldwide would be too simplistic, as it would clearly be applying almost exclusively to the Northwest Pacific."

Moreover, Grainger said he is confident China has reformed its system. "China is totally committed to improving the reliability of its fishery statistics which it recognizes as essential for effective fisheries management, policy-making and planning," he said. Two years ago, China reportedly ended the practice of rewarding fisheries managers who report increased harvests, implementing a zero-growth policy that aims to maintain the catch at 1998 levels.

And one conservationist said the findings do not really mean that much for specific fisheries, many of which biologists had already known to be declining. "Personally, I don't think this news is all that significant," said Scott Burns of the World Wildlife Fund. "If you look behind the overall numbers, you see that many of the world's high-value fisheries have been in trouble for years. ... The overall catch numbers continued to rise until recently because of increased catches in large-volume, low-value fisheries like anchoveta and pilchard."

Still, the new findings could play a role in policy debates on Capitol Hill over future management of U.S. fisheries. A staffer for Rep. Sam Farr (D-Calif.) said the report could build support for legislation aimed at rebuilding the nation's fish stocks. Farr's Fisheries Recovery Act would put new limits on fishing some stocks, employ more observers and data collectors, direct more funding to management and involve more fishermen in management.

The report's findings are "certainly not good news," said Farr spokeswoman Betsy Lordan. "But we're hopeful that it might draw more attention to our bill and more support from Congress."