



THE INDEPENDENT

29 November 2001

China's fishy tale puts global food supply in danger

By Charles Arthur Technology Editor

Global fish stocks will have halved by 2015, according to a study released today that puts down any suggestion that the sea's population is recovering.

Scientists at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver have found that global catches in the 1990s fell by 360m kilograms per year, contrary to previous estimates by [the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation \(FAO\)](#), which had suggested an annual increase of 315m kilos.

The discrepancy is blamed on China, which is accused of concealing the absence of fish from its shores by reporting misleadingly large catches.

Reg Watson, the co-author of the report and a senior research fellow at the university, told the science journal Nature that the world was "playing with the food supply of the planet".

"The best thing we can do is shake ourselves out of our complacency," said Dr Watson. "The FAO has been saying things are all right but things have in fact been getting progressively worse since 1988."

By 2015, the amount of seafood per person available would be half what it was in 1988, when the fish supply peaked at 15kg per person, claims the study.

Jane Lubchenco, a professor at Oregon State University, called the study's findings "earthshaking" and said that they "call into question the very basis of international fisheries management".

Although China only has 1 per cent of the world's oceans, it was responsible for huge anomalies in the reporting of the amounts of fish available to catch.

The scientists in Canada claimed that China exaggerated its catches because "the same parts of the state devoted to monitoring the economy are also tasked with increasing its output". Daniel Pauly, a co-author of the study, said: "Our studies showed that whatever [China's] leaders set as production targets is what is officially reported.

"If you dictate fisheries [output] to increase by 5 per cent, then it is reported to increase by 5 per cent," he said.

Elliot Morley, Britain's Fisheries minister, said: "We are clear that it is foolish to overfish in the short term only for the fisheries to collapse in the longer term." He said he would be emphasising the point to other European states when ministers will meet to set next year's fishing quotas in a fortnight's time.

The errors in China's reporting emerged from a computer model that predicts catch sizes in different ocean regions. It showed that China's reports were unrealistically high compared to other oceans with similar characteristics.

Dr Pauly said the world community must end overfishing if it was to meet future food demands. The new study, he said, "dashed hopes that the sea can continue to meet our growing demand for fish".

Dr Watson said that the food chains for fish resembled a pyramid: "We've fished out many of the fish right at the top of the pyramid and now we're going after the rest. But they can't sustain it and the seas can't. We aren't going to be able to get back to the 1988 levels. The oceans aren't in the same healthy state that they were."



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