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## China's Whopper of a Fish Tale

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For years, marine scientists have warned that too much fish has been caught from the world's oceans and called for drastic measures to curb widespread overfishing. Yet the reported global yield of marine fisheries continued to rise through the 1990s, particularly because of large increases reported by China.

Now, a detailed analysis of fishery statistics has found evidence of substantial overreporting during the last decade, mainly by China. Apparently, under the Communist system of matching result with plan, the same bureaucrats were responsible for not only counting the catch but also meeting targets to increase it - so they simply exaggerated the count to match their allotted goals.

As a result, instead of rising by an average of 330,000 tons per year since 1988, as recorded in United Nations data, the world's catch has actually declined by an average of 360,000 tons per year, according to a study in the current issue of the journal *Nature*.

The finding has major implications, marine experts say, for world food supplies and for the contentious battles to cut back on oversized fishing fleets. As the reported catch climbed over the last decade beyond the roughly 80 million tons a year that marine scientists saw as a crucial plateau, fishing industry representatives continued to fight against stringent limits and cited the apparently continued growth in catches as a reason to keep expanding fleets.

The authors of the *Nature* study, Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, note that the greatest impact of the finding that catch statistics have been inflated may be to engender complacency about the state of the world's marine stock and about overfishing.

Spurious data, they further suggest, have led to unwise investments in fishing fleets and deterred proper regulation, which they still argue is necessary.

The only source of global fishery data is the Food and Agriculture Organization, a UN agency that must rely on numbers provided by member governments. Scientists had been puzzled by the rise in catches reported by China from its adjacent seas because they did not match yields from similar waters elsewhere, and there were signs overall of a decline in the abundance of fish in Asian waters.

Senior Chinese officials have recognized a serious overfishing problem and, beginning in 1998, ordered the catch to stabilize.

So in 1999 and 2000, improbably, the total Chinese catch reported by lower officials was exactly what it had been in 1998.

“It’s almost a joke,” Mr. Pauly said, and shows how unreliable the Chinese data have become. Chinese officials have acknowledged past problems with data, but they say the country is now confronting the problem of overfishing.

In the most dramatic step, the government has mandated no-fishing periods in key regions. But scientists say that this approach has never worked because fishing is simply intensified in other seasons and that the only solution is a drastic reduction in fleets.

Worldwide, the price of fish has risen sharply since the 1980s, Mr. Pauly said, another sign that supplies cannot keep up with global demand.

“A lot of people thought we could feed more people from the sea,” he said. “But it’s over.”