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China, U.N. challenged over fish Scientists question catch figures, calculate sharp decline

Scientists have calculated that China and its fishing fleet, from huge trawlers to small operators like these fishermen in Xiamen, has overstated its annual catch.

Challenging China as well as a United Nations agency, scientists writing in the journal *Nature* calculated that a numbers game is misrepresenting fish stocks worldwide. "Misreporting by countries with large fisheries" is creating a false sense that oceans are still abundant, they wrote.

Based at the University of British Columbia at Vancouver, the scientists found that global catches, which were thought to be increasing during the 1990s by 700 million pounds of fish per year, actually have been decreasing by nearly 800 million pounds annually. Just one group, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, compiles global fisheries statistics, but it relies on voluntary reporting of catches from countries to estimate the amount of fish the oceans hold.

The new studies being announced Thursday call into question the veracity of FAO figures and its reporting system. "FAO must generally rely on the statistics provided by member countries, even if it is doubtful that these correspond to reality," authors Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly said. Moreover, by subtracting just one fish from the equation, the abundant Peruvian anchoveta, which is used only for fish meal and whose population fluctuates due to El Nino, an even more striking decrease was apparent: 1.5 billion pounds a year less seafood available for human consumption.

"Misreporting by countries with large fisheries, combined with the large and widely fluctuating catch of species such as the Peruvian anchoveta, can cause globally spurious trends," Watson and Pauly wrote.

TRACKING A DECLINE

Since 1988, when the world's seafood supply peaked at 34 pounds a person each year, the combined effects of overfishing and increasing human populations have reduced the amount of fish and shellfish available on Earth to only about 25 pounds a person each year, according to the findings.

And this trend is projected to continue rapidly downward to less than 17 pounds a person each year by 2020. Using statistics gathered by the FAO since 1950, the scientists created maps of world fisheries catches and then built a computer model to predict catch size in different ocean regions. The model showed China's reported catches were unrealistically high when compared with catches from other ocean areas that have similar characteristics such as depth, temperature and biological productivity.

“The greatest impact of inflated global catch statistics is the complacency that it engenders,” the scientists concluded. “There seems little need for public concern, or intervention by international agencies, if the world’s fisheries are keeping pace with people’s needs. If, however, as the adjusted figures demonstrate, the catches of world fisheries are in general decline, then there is a clear need to act.”

STANDING UP TO CHINA

The findings came as little surprise to Lee Alverson, a global fisheries consultant in Seattle who headed research for the National Marine Fisheries Service in the Northwest and Alaska from 1970 to 1980. “It takes a lot of nerve to make the sort of accusation they did about China, but there were a lot of scientists who felt nervous about those numbers,” Alverson said. “If any of the nations are putting bogus numbers into the accounting process, then our ability to assess if overfishing is going on is in jeopardy.”

Pauly said the world community must end overfishing if it is to meet future food demands. The new studies, he said, are “dashing hopes that the sea can continue to meet our growing demand for fish.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.