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## A FUTURE WITHOUT FISH? World's commercial fisheries must reverse course or face extinction

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[Joshua S. Reichert](#)



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FOR DECADES, the operating assumption 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 the increased demand from a growing global population.

It now appears that this assumption is wrong. In fact, a new scientific report in the journal Nature shows that the opposite is true.

Since the late 1980s, the world's fish catch has been declining by about 800 million pounds per year rather than increasing by 700 million pounds -- as was previously reported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Not only are we exceeding the oceans' capacity to provide fish, but if trends continue, many of the world's commercial fisheries will be wiped out within two to three decades.

The Food and Agriculture Organization relied on numbers provided by individual countries to compile its annual list of the world's fish catch. For years, these numbers showed that the world's catch was slowly rising.

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What the authors of the Nature study found, however, was that China was significantly overreporting the size of its annual catch. In China, the centralized socialist system had rewarded officials with promotions on the basis of reported production increases, thereby providing an incentive to report ever higher catch levels.

Once the Chinese catch statistics were adjusted for accuracy, it turns out that the global catch is actually declining, and that for years we have been catching more fish than the oceans can replace.

Earlier in this 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 now severely depleted. The loss of the cod fishery in New England and the maritime provinces of Canada 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 in revenue, can be attributed to the unwillingness of both the U.S. and Canadian governments to reduce fishing quotas in the face of scientific evidence that stocks were collapsing. As cod and other species have declined, fishing fleets around the world have turned their attention to the more abundant species lower on the food chain. Boats have targeted the enormous populations of schooling forage fish such as capelin and menhaden, which are primarily used for fishmeal to feed chickens, pigs and other domestic animals.

Now, however, 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. At present, more than 54 million people worldwide earn their living from fishing.

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Unless steps are taken soon to address the problem of overfishing, many 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. In many developing countries, the percentage is higher. In Asia, for example, fish represent 26 percent of the continent's animal protein intake. In Africa, the figure is 17 percent. (In North and Central America, by contrast, the figure is just 7 percent.)

By 2020, scientists project that 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.

Fortunately, it is not too late to reverse course.

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

Continuation of these unsound policies will only make the present situation worse.

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

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

The absence of these types of international mechanisms is simply a blueprint for disaster. The findings reported in Nature represent a wake-up call to the world community: Reduce fishing, or face a future with no

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fish or fishermen to catch them.

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