

South China Morning Post

November 30, 2001

Over-reporting by China 'hides declining catches'

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Catches from the world's oceans are severely declining, but the trend has allegedly been masked by China's practice of increasingly over-reporting the amount of fish it lands each year. A report written by Dr Daniel Pauly and Dr Reg Watson at the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre in Vancouver claims official Chinese estimates of its fishery catches are double the actual figure.

The team of scientists found that global catches, which were thought to be increasing during the 1990s by 315 million kg of fish per year, have actually been decreasing by nearly 360 million kg annually.

Just one entity, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 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.

For China's catches in the South and East China Sea, it predicted estimates almost 50 per cent below the Chinese official estimates. For example, the model for 1999 predicted a catch of 5.5 million tonnes, while Chinese officials reported a catch of 10.1 million tonnes.

The report also found that every nation except China reported declines in fish catches. The researchers claim China's over-reporting masks a serious decline in global fish stocks. China's reported catches account for about 15 per cent of the global harvest. The new studies, unveiled yesterday in the journal *Nature*, calls 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," the authors said. Beijing relies on local government officials and fisherman to provide catch figures. Until recently, officials were promoted on the basis of production increases in their areas.

"Misreporting by countries with large fisheries, combined with the large and widely fluctuating catch of species such as the Peruvian anchovy, can cause globally spurious trends," the authors said.

"There is a clear need to act," they said, attacking a culture of "complacency" among international agencies. "The oceans should continue to provide for a substantial portion of the world's protein needs. The present trends of overfishing, wide-scale disruption of coastal habitats and the rapid expansion of non-sustainable (fish farms), however, threaten the world's food security."

Since 1988, when the world's seafood supply peaked at 15.3kg per person each year, the combined effects of overfishing and increasing human populations have reduced the amount of fish and shellfish available to only about 11.25kg per person each year, the findings show.

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.