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Size of the catch turned out to be fishy

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

But a detailed analysis of fishery statistics has found evidence of substantial over-reporting during the last decade, mainly by China. Apparently, under the communist system of matching result with plan, the same bureaucrats were responsible for counting the catch, and meeting targets to increase it. The result was that they simply exaggerated the count to match their allotted goals.

So, instead of rising an average of 330,000 tonnes a year since 1988, as recorded in United Nations data, the world's catch has declined by an average of 360,000 tonnes a 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 battles to cut back on oversized fishing fleets. As the reported catch climbed over the last decade beyond the roughly 80 million tonnes 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 latest 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 over-fishing.

But they say proper regulation is still necessary. Worldwide, the price of fish has risen sharply since the 1980s, Mr Pauly said, a sign that supplies cannot keep up with demand, regardless of the exaggerated Chinese catch.

"A lot of people thought we could feed more people from the sea," Mr Pauly said. "But it's over." The only source of global fishery data is the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, which 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.

Chinese officials have recognised a serious over-fishing problem and, beginning in 1998, ordered the catch to be stabilised. So in 1999 and 2000, improbably, the total catch reported by officials was exactly what it had been in 1998. "It's almost a joke," said Mr Pauly.