

# The Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

December 1, 2001 rday

## China's whopper

Exaggeration and fishing go hand in hand, and no one's too surprised when the size of the story exceeds that of the catch.

That kind of bragging is pretty harmless. But in assessing the health of the world's marine fisheries, fish stories are no joke. They are downright dangerous. Scientists need accurate information, not grossly inflated figures, if they are to figure out the size of the global catch each year and track the impact of fishing and other factors on the world's supply of fish. But the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, which compiles the statistics, depends on countries to provide information on their catches. That opens the door to inaccuracies.

A group of scientists at the University of British Columbia reported in the journal *Nature* that the organization's figures have been badly skewed by exaggerated reports from China. While the FAO reported that global catches increased by 700 million pounds of fish per year during the 1990s, the catch has really been decreasing by close to 800 million pounds per year. That's a huge and disturbing difference. If their analysis is correct, China has managed to disguise the serious condition of the world's fisheries.

The picture painted by the researchers is quite grim: the world's supply of seafood has dropped from a high of 33 pounds per person annually in 1988 to 25 pounds per person this year. They believe that the decline will continue, reaching less than 18 pounds per person by 2020. Researchers at the university uncovered the problem by comparing China's numbers with statistics from other areas with similar characteristics. The comparison cast suspicion on China's reports.

As it turns out, China created an incentive for lying by offering promotions to county and provincial officials who showed growth in the catch figures. That practically guaranteed bad numbers.

The government changed that practice two years ago, a spokesman for the Chinese Agriculture Ministry's Fisheries Department said. Now, guidelines say that catch reports should not exceed 1998 levels. "The Chinese government has noted the problem of falling fish stocks and is paying more attention to the preservation of resources," the spokesman said.

But the damage has been done. Years of flawed statistics have concealed a growing problem and perhaps robbed urgency from the need to address overfishing. The FAO should take this study as a warning to cast a more skeptical eye on the voluntary data it receives and emphasize the importance of accuracy.