

# The Toronto Star

November 29, 2001

Fishy data puts China on hook; Chinese hauls skew data B.C. scientists

The world's sole tally of fish stocks is being wildly overstated due to fishy statistics from China, a study by researchers at the University of British Columbia suggests.

For more than a decade, China is alleged to have exaggerated catch reports, leading scientists to believe there's a healthy number of fish in the sea, according to an article in today's edition of the journal *Nature*.

Despite local evidence that fish stocks are overexploited, figures from the United Nations have long suggested worldwide catches rose 330,000 tonnes a year throughout the 1990s.

Researchers Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly contend those numbers have helped to foster a false sense of security about the health of international fish stocks.

In an interview, Watson argued that doctored numbers from China have been artificially driving up the world tally, saying stocks actually declined by some 360,000 tonnes a year since 1988. "The catches are much higher than you'd expect, inexplicably higher," Watson said of China's annual catch reports, which account for roughly 18 per cent of the world total.

"There really is no oceanographic feature that we've looked at that explains the high catch." A socio-political feature of China may explain it its mid-level government officials tend to get promotions based on meeting production targets.

As a result, he argues that global figures - relied upon by banks, investment firms and conservation experts to determine economic and environmental policy - are seriously out of whack.

Decisions based on the belief that fish stocks are healthy could be disastrous, Watson warned. Watson described the experience of one fishing firm whose supertrawler - capable of scooping up in days what entire fleets would take months to haul in - went from one barren sea to another in a futile search for fish.

"Information we've been relying on has been faulty," the UBC scientist said.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has long suspected something was amiss, but China refuses to discuss the matter.

Watson devised a statistical model to predict catch rates. Most regions reported catch rates that corresponded to the model's predictions. China did not. The model predicted the region, where major fish populations have long been classed as overexploited, would produce 5.5 million tonnes in 1999. That same year, China reported catching 10.1 million tonnes.

A spokesperson for the Chinese Agricultural Ministry's fisheries department said the government stopped two years ago offering county and provincial officials job promotions based on growth.

“Local government officials have no incentive to inflate their fishing output,” Wan Cheng said. “We believe there is no intentional overreporting of statistics, but only some possible statistical defects.”