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Fisheries reports deserve wide public debate:  
Both seriously question the assumptions we have made

A pair of fascinating studies of fisheries policy released last week present some sobering and controversial ideas that make for a rousing public conversation of the kind that shapes and invigorates our democracy.

First came a research paper published in the prestigious British journal *Nature* by UBC scientists Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly that's causing intellectual upheaval in the arcane world of international fisheries. And retired B.C. Supreme Court justice Stuart Leggatt brought down an independent inquiry into salmon farming that immediately attracted fierce industry criticism for its recommendation that an alternative to marine net-cages be found.

The UBC researchers raise troubling questions about what's really happening to global fisheries compared to what we think is happening. Fisheries remain a critical component in the global food supply, especially in the developing world, where they provide relatively inexpensive but high-quality protein. In fact, while fish provides only about 20 per cent of all animal protein consumed by humans, it provides 60 per cent in the developing world.

And fisheries employ more than 200 million people worldwide. So whatever happens to global fisheries promises to have profound impacts.

The UBC scientists note that something worrying appears to be going on with the current statistical picture of abundance. Their research suggests that for more than a decade China has grossly misled the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization—the agency that compiles world food statistics—by inflating catch figures to mask what has really been a steady decline in fish abundance. Under China's bureaucracy, fisheries managers are given catch quotas that increase each year whether or not there's enough fish to fill them, and managers routinely falsified catch documents to satisfy bosses and improve the odds of promotion.

Messrs. Pauly and Watson calculate that, since 1988, real catches world-wide have dropped by as much as 330,000 kilograms of fish a year while UN statistics distorted by China's phony numbers show a falsely optimistic 360,000-kg increase. That's an annual gap of more than half a million kilograms between what we thought we were catching and what was really coming in.

Canadians, who have recently experienced the catastrophe of the collapse of East Coast cod, are well aware of the consequences of statistically miscalculating the biomass of fish stocks. And British Columbians, faced with growing evidence of problems with both wild salmon and some groundfish stocks on the West Coast, will want assurances that our own harvest rates in the Northeast Pacific are sustainable and remain so.

That means Ottawa will have to ensure adequate funding for stock assessment and to provide proper resources for baseline research into the status of species about which even the department of fisheries and oceans' own scientists acknowledge not enough is known.

The Leggatt Inquiry, on the other hand, was controversial from the get-go because it was funded by the David Suzuki Foundation, a crusading environmental organization that has voiced antipathy to current salmon farming practices. Industry and government declined to participate in the inquiry, which had no power to compel any of its witnesses.

And the ink was hardly dry on the report before the B.C. Salmon Farmers Association was dismissing the report as illegitimate, an echo of unscientific rhetoric from the Suzuki Foundation and out of touch with technological advances in the net-cage industry.

Given the often testy relationship between the two interest groups, perhaps that response is to be expected. On one hand such opinions certainly deserve consideration; on the other, who's to say an inquiry by a citizens' group has no legitimacy simply because some parties choose not to participate, particularly when it's conducted by someone like Mr. Leggatt, whose integrity is not in question?

The former judge served 17 years with the Supreme Court and 11 years as both an MP and as an MLA. And if some factions decided not to give evidence, other witnesses who are entirely legitimate did choose to appear. Among them were many First Nations; research scientists from the universities of B.C., Simon Fraser, Oregon, Alberta and Hawaii; the Vancouver Aquarium; a former director-general of the federal department of fisheries and oceans; former senator Ray Perreault, recently retired as chair of a Senate committee on fisheries; former federal fisheries minister John Fraser; an Alaska state senator; the mayor of Juneau and representatives of both net and hook-and-line commercial fishing interests in both Canadian and American waters. Nobody believes for a moment that fish-farming can, or indeed should, disappear from a world where growing population demands a secure supply of protein. It's too valuable a resource to be spurned. But nobody believes the industry has yet achieved perfection, either.

This year almost 30,000 Atlantic salmon escaped from B.C.'s commercial net-cages—the total has climbed to more than 413,000 since 1991 -- while Alaskans who banned salmon-farming complain that Atlantics from B.C. farms are turning up in their rivers.

There's even evidence that, contrary to assurances it could never happen, Atlantics may already have spawned in some B.C. rivers occupied by wild salmon stocks. And raising for discussion concerns about waste management at fish farms seems reasonable enough.

In a democracy, decisions are made in the ferment of a marketplace where ideas test one another and thrive or perish on the viability of the arguments and evidence they advance. So we should all welcome research like that of Mr. Pauly and Mr. Watson, who challenge conventional wisdom regarding fish stocks, and inquiries like Mr. Leggatt's, who has stepped outside the box of official orthodoxy and raised questions about whether an industry is developing as it should.

And people who have contrary views should be engaging their critics, not dismissing or ignoring them.