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China accused of distorting fish catch data:  
Inflated figures mask a decline in stocks, two UBC researchers say

Larry Pynn

China has grossly misled the United Nations for more than a decade about the state of its fisheries, effectively masking a steady decline in the world's fish stocks, two University of B.C. researchers charged Wednesday.

Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly of UBC's Fisheries Centre contend in a controversial report in the scientific journal *Nature* that China has consistently reported inflated commercial catches. "I don't really like to say the Chinese are lying," Watson said in an interview. "They're a victim of their statistical system. It gets to the point there is no link with reality."

Catch levels are considered an important indicator of the state of the ocean -- if catches keep going up, the assumption is that stocks are healthy. But if the catches are exaggerated, stocks could be in trouble without scientists knowing it.

Watson and Pauly attribute the false Chinese data to the communist system, whereby fishery managers -- unlike factory managers -- are given catch quotas that increase annually whether or not there are enough fish to fill them. These managers then falsify catch documents to satisfy their superiors and improve their chances of promotion.

The false catch data is provided annually to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and can be used by both private institutions and the World Bank when making fishery-related loans. The effect of the inflated figures is that ever-bigger fishing fleets are built to chase smaller fish stocks.

The two researchers estimated that since 1988, actual global catches have probably declined by 330,000 kilograms of fish per year -- compared with official statistics showing a 360,000-kilogram annual increase, the result of China's false reporting.

"We're talking about the future food supply here," Watson said of the need for accurate catch figures that reflect the state of the oceans. "The amount of fishing must be managed properly. We're going from country to country on a mopping-up operation, while we're building bigger boats. It's unthinkable."

In response, a spokesman for the Chinese agricultural ministry's fisheries department said that country's government, as of two years ago, has stopped offering county and provincial officials job promotions based on catch growth.

"Local government officials have no incentive to inflate their fishing output," spokesman Wan Cheng said. "We believe there is no intentional over-reporting of statistics, but only some

possible statistical defects.” He said the government has put into effect a “zero growth” policy to stabilize the catch reports from oceans at 1998 levels, he said.

Said Watson: “It sounds like they're willing to concede, which is amazing for them, publicly, that there is this exaggeration going on. They're calling it cheating by people within the system, and that it is coming under control. We'll see.”

The study's findings sound accurate to Lee Alverson, a global fisheries consultant in Seattle who headed research for the National Marine Fisheries Service in the Northwest and Alaska from 1970 to 1980.

“It takes a lot of nerve to make the sort of accusation they did about China, but there were a lot of scientists who felt nervous about those numbers,” Alverson said.