

Massive under-reporting of fish catches leads to declining stocks

By Steve Connor in Fort Lauderdale, Florida
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The total amount of fish being caught in the world is significantly under-reported because official statistics do not take into account the substantial catches made by some of the poorest nations that rely on fishing as a food staple, a study has found.

Scientists have estimated that for more than 50 years the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation has failed to report the huge volumes of fish being caught collectively by small-scale fisheries in its statistics on national catches.

They believe the discrepancy is exacerbating the decline in fish stocks by allowing some of the poorest countries to report higher fish stocks than really exist. This permits them to sell off their fishing rights to richer nations which take the highest-value fish.

Jennifer Jacquet, a member of the research team, said the official catch reported by the Mozambique government suggests that each citizen is eating about 3kg of fish per year. However, when the scientists looked at the catches being made by subsistence fishing, that consumption rate rose to 9kg a year.

Despite this three-fold discrepancy, the Mozambique government was using its reported catch to justify selling off fishing permits to EU boats that were coming into Mozambique waters to fish for high-value shrimp, which often leads to substantial bycatch that is thrown overboard as waste fish – further depleting stocks for the local community.

"This is the antithesis of the Robin Hood parable. Instead of stealing from the rich to give to the poor, we're stealing from the poor to give to the rich," Ms Jacquet said yesterday.

Daniel Pauly, of the University of British Columbia in Canada, said the study emphasised how under-reporting of fish catches was making the overall decline of fish stocks worse for some of the poorest people in the world.

"We discovered one nation under-reporting its fisheries catches and then realised that this wasn't an isolated case but a problem globally. Everywhere we look, the number of fish being taken from reefs is greater than reported," Dr Pauly said. "This news is not only shocking but disheartening. Our previous conclusions about widespread over fishing must be amplified," he told the International Coral Reef Symposium held in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

"The extent of the under-reporting is of such a magnitude, it boggles the mind," he said. "The only fish being reported in the national catches are the ones that are traded and the rest is ignored. So the overall picture is wrong."