

Significant Arctic fish catches going unreported: UBC researchers warn

BY LARRY PYNN, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 4, 2011

VANCOUVER - University of British Columbia researchers say that Canada, the U.S., and Russia have not been accurately reporting fisheries catches in the Arctic.

In a study published this week in the journal *Polar Biology*, they estimate that fisheries catches in the Arctic totaled 950,000 tonnes from 1950 to 2006, almost 75 times the amount reported to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) during this period.

"Ineffective reporting, due to governance issues and a lack of credible data on small-scale fisheries, has given us a false sense of comfort that the Arctic is still a pristine frontier when it comes to fisheries," lead author Dirk Zeller, a senior research fellow at UBC's Fisheries Centre, said in a statement. "We now offer a more accurate baseline against which we can monitor changes in fish catches and to inform policy and conservation efforts."

Researchers from UBC's Fisheries Centre and department of earth and ocean sciences reconstructed fisheries catch data from various sources, including limited governmental reports and anthropological records of indigenous people, for FAO's Area 18, covering Arctic coastal areas in northern Siberia (Russia), Arctic Alaska, and the Canadian Arctic.

Official FAO data on fish catches in the Arctic area studied from 1950 to 2006 were based solely on statistics supplied by Russia and amounted to 12,700 tonnes.

The UBC study found that while the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service's Alaska branch currently reports zero catches to FAO for the Arctic area, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has collected commercial data and undertaken studies on 15 coastal communities in the Alaskan Arctic that rely on fisheries for subsistence. The estimated fish catch during this period in Alaska alone totaled 89,000 tonnes.

While no catches were reported to FAO by Canada, the research team shows commercial and small-scale fisheries actually amounted to 94,000 tonnes in catches in the same time span.

Meanwhile, Russia's total catch was actually 770,000 tonnes from 1950 to 2006, or nearly 12,000 tonnes per year.

"Our work shows a lack of care by the Canadian, U.S. and Russian governments in trying to understand the food needs and fish catches of northern communities," said Daniel Pauly, whose Sea Around Us Project at UBC has shown a trend of fish stocks moving towards polar regions due to the effects of climate change.

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