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WHAT'S THE CATCH?

12/22/2014 : DANIEL PAULY

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Whenever I see an angler on a pier, I always want to know what is in his or her bucket. I wonder – what is the catch today? Even if the angler is fishing just to relax, that hobby also has a purpose. They hope to catch something, even if it is just a small fish swimming in a bucket. What is true for the lone angler on a pier is also true for commercial, even large-scale, industrial fisheries. What they catch matters and we can understand what they do by looking at what they catch.



This is why, throughout the world, governments monitor and analyze fishery catch data. Catch data not only allows an assessment of commercial fisheries performance, but it also helps to establish catch limits to ensure sustainability of our fisheries. This estimate – called the total allowable catch – uses current data to estimate a catch limit for the following year that will put a number on how many fish can be caught without endangering the health of fish stocks.

Every year, catch estimates from around the world are sent to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome, Italy, where they are collated, standardized and published on www.fao.org. This is how we know that the “official” world fisheries catch is about 80 million metric tons (176 billion pounds) per year and that it has been slightly declining over the last 15 years.

FAO statistics are used for numerous international comparisons and scenarios about global seafood production. Unfortunately, these statistics are misleading as FAO-member countries do not monitor all their fisheries. Illegal fisheries, small-scale fisheries – which use boats that are under 30 feet long, and fishing conducted from the shore line are all excluded from the FAO catch data. And subsequently, most artisanal fisheries and subsistence fisheries, where seafood is gathered for direct consumption by fishers and their families are excluded. It also overlooks recreational fishing, which often is more than a small fish in a bucket.

The end results are an underestimation of the total catch, the economic value of fisheries and their impact on coastal ecosystems. *Sea Around Us*, a research initiative at the University of British Columbia funded by The Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, deals with the issue of catch underreporting through a newly developed approach of “catch reconstruction,” which enables any fishery – even those excluded by typical FAO data – to be linked with a catch estimate. The application of this approach to 250 maritime countries and territories around the world confirms that the world catch is much higher than officially reported. This is certainly a good thing: the world oceans are more productive than we knew, and we catch more seafood than we knew.

We believe the first step in conservation is having accurate data. From here, we can begin to truly understand the landscape, which will ultimately inform the creation of conservation strategies.

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