



Fishermen holding a net between boat and beach at Pinda, Mozambique. Photo: Stig Nygaard, Wikimedia Commons

Faulty data mask decline in Mozambique's fish stocks, researchers say

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Improvements in the way Mozambique collects fishing statistics mean the country has drastically over-reported growth in the size of the country's catch and could now miss the warning signs of deteriorating fish stocks, academics have warned.

Mozambique's official fisheries data shows that the amount of fish caught by small-scale fishing increased 800% from 2003 to 2004. However, a **new publication** from research institute Sea Around Us indicates that this increase does not reflect reality.

"What happened was that the small-scale sector was massively under-represented in the reported data for the longest time, and when a new reporting scheme was put in place in the early 2000s, improved catch data by the always-present subsistence and artisanal fisheries were added. A very similar amount of fish was caught in previous years, it was just not registered in the reported data," according to Dirk Zeller, head of the Sea Around Us – Indian Ocean at the University of Western Australia.

"If you look in the reported data you seem to have an increase in the trend," Zeller told *Zitamar News*. "But if you actually reconstruct the data you see that the catching peaked somewhere in the 1980s and has been declining since.

This means that when Mozambique submitted its data to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), they were already biased as neither the country's statistical agency nor FAO insisted on undertaking retroactive adjustments, the researchers say – a problem that is replicated in a number of other countries.

"The problem is that these data are assembled by FAO and presented as global trends in the widely used State of the World Fisheries and Aquaculture report. But by not accounting for the presentist bias over an entire reported data history, FAO is misinterpreting trends," said Daniel Pauly, Principal Investigator of the Sea Around Us at the University of British Columbia, and Zeller's co-author.

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In most developing countries, the amount of fish caught is the only data available to monitor fish stocks – and these data are often not reported thoroughly, or misinterpreted.

Building on years of reconstructed fishery data, the project found that data is significantly flawed on a global basis, masking an actual decrease in catches of 1.2 million tonnes per year, as an increase.

This mistake can make it difficult to see the warning signs of over-fishing as data will report a non-existent long term increase in catches for many years forward.

A proper analysis of the data could show an overfishing problem, Zeller said, “and that is something that requires a policy response” – including having “to find another way of feeding your people and give them livelihood”.

Global problem

The FAO does not collect data itself, but only reports what member states contribute. Sea Around Us has concluded that this data collection is also deceptive on a global level – especially in developing countries.

“Most developing countries under-report and do not or only very marginally monitor small scale fisheries,” Zeller explains.

At the same time, there is a risk of the trends showing a “false” increase in catches when countries improve data collection without adjusting past data accordingly – as has happened in Mozambique.

According to Zeller, the FAO is the only entity that reports on fisheries on a global basis, and these reports are used as a basis for policy making, on a national and international level.

This means that fish stocks on a global scale might be much worse off than policymakers think.

“Given that we show that fishery levels have been declining and given that we know fishing efforts have been increasing globally, our catches per unit has been strongly declining since the mid ‘90s. That’s a sign of warning,” he says.

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