WWF has a new report out on compliance with the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's voluntary Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing, which was issued in 1995. The report details the extent to which 53 countries, responsible for more than 95% of the world's wild fish harvests, complied with the code between 2003 and 2005. An accompanying commentary by the authors in *Nature* (subscription required) draws two take-home lessons.

1) Developed countries in general have higher compliance rates than developing countries, reflecting their greater resources and capacity. Targeted aid could help poor countries which want to comply but face resource constraints.

2) Compliance even among wealthy nations is disappointingly low. Using a rough scoring system of "good" (7 or better on a scale of 0-10), "pass" (4-6), and "fail" (0-3), the authors report that:

> Not one country achieves a score in the good category and the average of all countries' ratings barely exceeds the fail threshold. Only six countries have overall compliance scores whose confidence limits overlap with [a score of 6] (Norway, the United States, Canada, Australia, Iceland and Namibia) . . . At the lower end, 28 countries, representing more than 40% of the world fish catch, had unequivocal fail grades overall.

The authors' bottom line:

> The time has come for a new integrated international legal instrument covering all aspects of fisheries management.

In other words, they want a true regulatory regime. Not surprisingly, voluntary measures tend not to hold nations' attention the way enforceable commitments might do. The same dynamic has been observed in other contexts, for example in the experience with voluntary ballast water control exchange measures in the U.S. Great Lakes. Expressions of good intentions significantly outstrip actual compliance until there are either credible sanctions associated with non-compliance or significant positive incentives for compliance.