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**UPDATED INDICATORS OF STOCK STATUS FOR SKIPJACK TUNA IN THE
EASTERN PACIFIC OCEAN**

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A major management objective for tunas in the eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO) is to keep stocks at levels capable of producing maximum sustainable yields (MSYs). Management objectives based on MSY or related reference points (*e.g.* fishing mortality that produces MSY (F_{MSY}); spawner-per-recruit proxies) are in use for many species and stocks worldwide. However, these objectives require that reference points and quantities to which they are compared be available. The various reference points require different amounts and types of information, ranging from biological information (*e.g.* natural mortality, growth, and stock-recruitment relationship) and fisheries characteristics (*e.g.* age-specific selectivity), to absolute estimates of biomass and exploitation rates. These absolute estimates generally require a formal stock assessment model. For many species, the information required to estimate these quantities is not available, and alternative approaches are needed. Even more data are required if catch quotas are to be used as the management tool.

Skipjack tuna is a notoriously difficult species to assess. Due to skipjack's high and variable productivity (*i.e.* annual recruitment is a large proportion of total biomass), it is difficult to detect the effect of fishing on the population with standard fisheries data and stock assessment methods. This is particularly true for the stock of the EPO, due to the lack of age-frequency data and the limited tagging data. The continuous recruitment and rapid growth of skipjack mean that the temporal stratification needed to observe modes in length-frequency data make the current sample sizes inadequate. Previous assessments have had difficulty in estimating the absolute levels of biomass and exploitation rates, due to the possibility of a dome-shaped selectivity curve (Maunder 2002; Maunder and Harley 2005), which would mean that there is a cryptic biomass of large skipjack that cannot be estimated. The most recent assessment of skipjack in the EPO (Maunder and Harley 2005) is considered preliminary because it is not known whether the catch per day fished for purse-seine fisheries is proportional to abundance. The results from that assessment are more consistent among sensitivity analyses than the earlier assessments, which suggests that they may be more reliable. However, in addition to the problems listed above, the levels of age-specific natural mortality are uncertain, if not unknown, and current yield-per-recruit (YPR) calculations indicate that the YPR would be maximized by catching the youngest skipjack in the model (Maunder and Harley 2005). Therefore, neither the biomass- nor fishing mortality-based reference points, nor the indicators to which they are compared, are available for skipjack in the EPO.

One of the major problems mentioned above is the uncertainty as to whether the catch per unit of effort (CPUE) of the purse-seine fisheries is an appropriate index of abundance for skipjack, particularly when the fish are associated with fish-aggregating devices (FADs). Purse-seine CPUE data are particularly problematic, because it is difficult to identify the appropriate unit of effort. In the current assessment, effort is defined as the amount of searching time required to find a school of fish on which to set the purse seine, and this is approximated by number of days fished. Few skipjack are caught in the longline fisheries or dolphin-associated purse-seine fisheries, so these fisheries cannot be used to develop reliable indices of abundance for skipjack. Within a single trip, purse-seine sets on unassociated schools are

generally intermingled with floating-object or dolphin-associated sets, complicating the CPUE calculations. Maunder and Hoyle (2007) developed a novel method to generate an index of abundance, using data from the floating-object fisheries. This method used the ratio of skipjack to bigeye in the catch and the “known” abundance of bigeye based on stock assessment results. Unfortunately, the method was of limited usefulness, and more research is needed to improve it. Currently, there is no reliable index of relative abundance for skipjack in the EPO. Therefore, other indicators of stock status, such as the average weight of the fish in the catch, should be investigated.

Since the stock assessments and reference points for skipjack in the EPO are so uncertain, developing alternative methods to assess and manage the species that are robust to these uncertainties would be beneficial. Full management strategy evaluation (MSE) for skipjack would be the most comprehensive method to develop and test alternative assessment methods and management strategies (Maunder 2007); however, developing MSE is time-consuming, and has not yet been conducted for skipjack. In addition, higher priority for MSE is given to yellowfin and bigeye tuna, as available data indicate that these species are more susceptible to overfishing than skipjack. Therefore, Maunder and Deriso (2007) investigated some simple indicators of stock status based on relative quantities. Rather than using reference points based on MSY, they compared current values of indicators to the distribution of indicators observed historically. They also developed a simple stock assessment model to generate indicators for biomass, recruitment, and exploitation rate. We update their results to include data for 2008. To evaluate the current values of the indicators in comparison to historical values, we use reference levels based on the 5th and 95th percentiles, as the distributions of the indicators are somewhat asymmetric.

Eight data- and model-based indicators are shown in Figure 1. The standardized effort, which is a measure of exploitation rate, is calculated as the sum of the effort, in days fished, for the floating-object (OBJ) and unassociated (NOA) fisheries. The floating-object effort is standardized to be equivalent to the unassociated effort by multiplying by the ratio of the average floating-object CPUE to the average unassociated CPUE. The purse-seine catch has been increasing since 1985, and is currently above the upper reference level. Except for a large peak in 1999, the floating-object CPUE has generally fluctuated around an average level since 1990. The unassociated CPUE has been higher than average since about 2003 and was at its highest level in 2008. The standardized effort indicator of exploitation rate has been increasing since about 1991, but declined in recent years. The average weight of skipjack has been declining since 2000, and in 2008 was at the lower reference level. The biomass, recruitment, and exploitation rate have been increasing over the past 20 years.

The main concern with the skipjack stock is the constantly increasing exploitation rate. However, the data- and model-based indicators have yet to detect any adverse consequence of this increase. The average weight is near its lower reference level, which can be a consequence of overexploitation, but it can also be caused by recent recruitments being greater than past recruitments.

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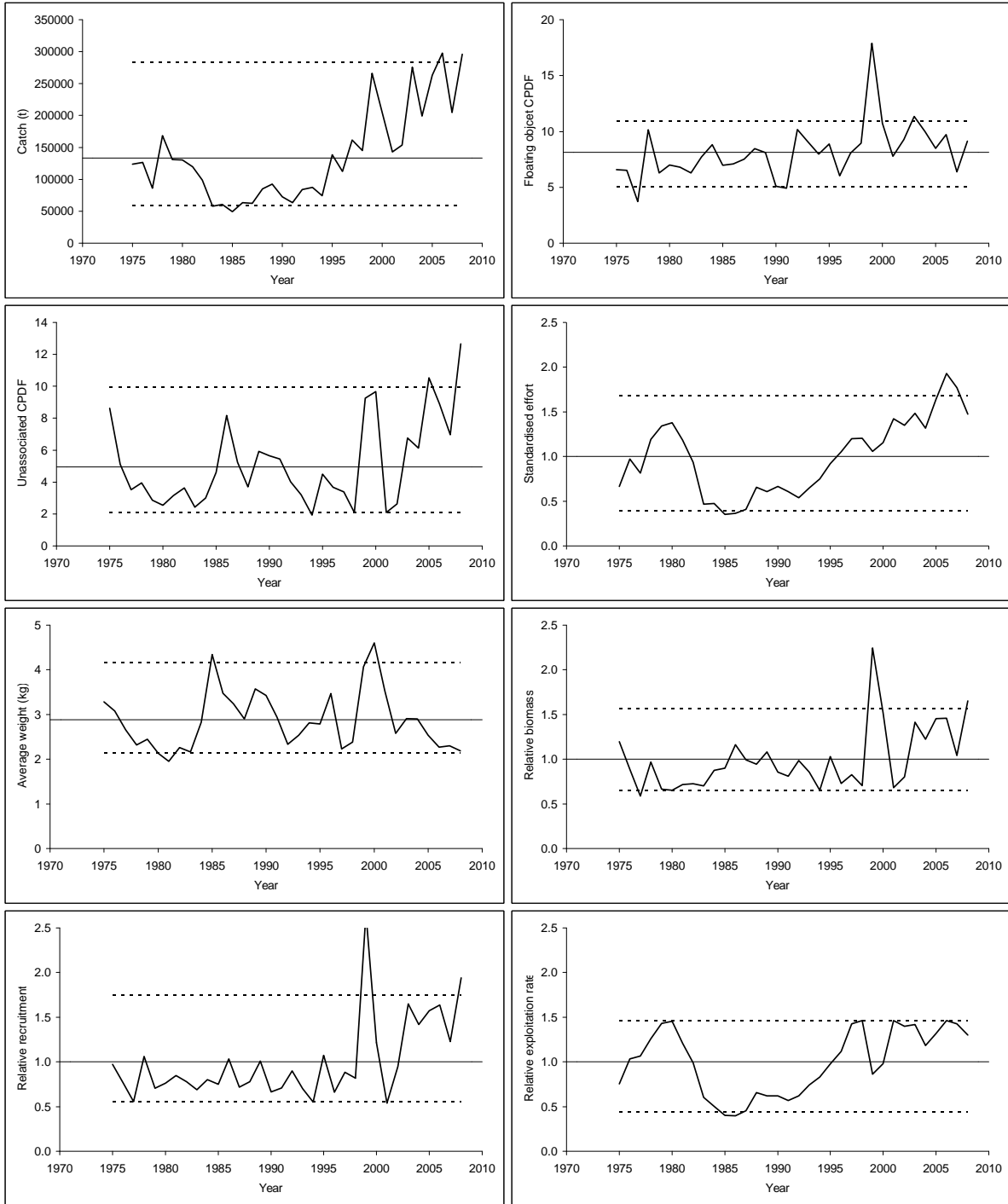


FIGURE 1. Indicators of stock status for skipjack tuna in the eastern Pacific Ocean. OBJ: floating-object fishery; NOA: unassociated fishery. All indicators are scaled so that their average equals one.