

INTER-AMERICAN TROPICAL TUNA COMMISSION

WORKING GROUP ON BYCATCH

TENTH MEETING

La Jolla, California (USA)

7 May 2020¹

DOCUMENT BYC-10 INF-A

UPDATED STOCK STATUS INDICATORS FOR SILKY SHARKS IN THE EASTERN PACIFIC OCEAN, 1994-2019

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CONTENTS

Summary 1

1. Background 2

2. Data and methods 3

3. Results and discussion 4

4. Future work 5

References 6

SUMMARY

The indices of relative abundance for large silky sharks (*Carcharhinus falciformis*) in the eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO), developed from bycatch-per-set data collected by on-board observers from purse-seine sets on floating objects and presented at the 10th meeting of the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC-10) in May 2019 (Document [SAC-10-17](#)), were updated with data from 2019. Previous analyses ([SAC-08-08a\(i\)](#), Lennert-Cody *et al.* 2019) identified a correlation between north EPO indices, particularly for small (<90 cm) and medium (90-150 cm) silky sharks, and interannual variability in oceanographic conditions, and thus the indices for those size categories, and the “all silky sharks” combined category, were not updated because of concerns about bias. In both north and south EPO, the indices for large (>150 cm) silky sharks for 2019 were at, or slightly below, the 2018 values, following a more pronounced decrease in the indices from 2017 to 2018. Because of recent increases in the number of sharks recorded by observers as released alive, indices for large silky sharks that included these data were also calculated, and showed a somewhat less pessimistic long-term trend. There has been concern about the accuracy of the size category estimates recorded for sharks released alive, which could result in the increase in live releases biasing the indices by size. However, preliminary results from a recent survey of observers suggest that they are fairly confident in their ability to estimate the size category of sharks released alive from the main release locations aboard the vessel and with the primary release methods, and that the estimates for larger sharks are less likely to be affected by where on the vessel and how the animals were released than those for smaller sharks. Nonetheless, there remains uncertainty about how the number of sharks released alive has changed since 1994, the first year for which the index is evaluated. Considerations for future research, including some presented previously ([SAC-07-06b\(i\)](#), [SAC-07-06b\(iii\)](#), [SAC-08-11](#)) on improving shark fishery data collection in the EPO, are also presented.

¹ Postponed to a later date to be determined.

1. BACKGROUND

An attempt by the IATTC staff in 2013 to assess the status of the silky shark in the EPO, using conventional stock assessment models, was severely hindered by major uncertainties in the fishery data, primarily in the total annual catch in the early years for all fisheries that caught silky sharks in the EPO ([SAC-05 INF-F](#)). Although the attempt produced a substantial amount of new information about the silky shark in the EPO (*e.g.*, absolute and relative magnitude of the catch by different fisheries, and their selectivities), the absolute scale of population trends and the derived management quantities were compromised by gaps in the available data. Since a conventional stock assessment was not possible, in 2014 the staff proposed a suite of possible stock status indicators (SSIs) that could be used for monitoring the silky shark in the EPO and as a basis for management advice ([SAC-05-11a](#)), among them standardized bycatch-per-set (BPS) indices from the purse-seine fishery. In addition, the staff is collaborating in Pacific-wide silky shark assessment research, for which reliable indices of abundance are critical ([Clarke et al. 2018](#)).

Studies of variability in the purse-seine BPS indices ([SAC-08-08a\(i\)](#), Lennert-Cody *et al.* 2019) have suggested that recent large fluctuations, particularly in the north EPO index for small (<90 cm total length (TL)) and medium (90-150 cm TL) silky sharks, may be influenced by inter-annual variability in oceanographic conditions (*i.e.*, El Niño and La Niña events). Those analyses found that the correlation between silky shark indices and the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO; an index of interannual-to-interdecadal variability of the Pacific Ocean climate), varied by shark size category and sub-region within the equatorial tropical Pacific. Correlations were highest for small and medium silky sharks in the western north EPO and in the central and western tropical Pacific, but decreased towards the coast in the north EPO. It was hypothesized that this spatial pattern in correlation may be due to movement of juvenile silky sharks across the Pacific as the eastern edge of the Indo-Pacific warm pool shifts location with El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) events. Thus, the indices for small and medium silky sharks may be biased as indicators of stock status. The indices for large (>150 cm TL) silky sharks, however, may be less susceptible to oceanographic influences because they were less correlated with the PDO, and were more spatially homogenous among sub-regions within the EPO. Therefore, only the indices for large silky sharks have been updated since the previous report in 2018.

The transition to an SSI based only on data for large silky sharks required revision of the treatment of data on live releases. Prior to late 2004, silky sharks that were released alive would not have been recorded, because the on-board observers recorded only sharks that arrived on the deck of the vessel already dead or that died on the deck. In late 2004, observers started collecting detailed data on the size, sex, and fate of all incidentally-caught sharks brailed onto the deck of the vessel with the tuna catch (Román *et al.* 2005), including counts of those released alive. It is believed that many of the sharks recorded as dead prior to 2005 would now be released alive and recorded as such, due mainly to the 2005 ban on “finning²” sharks (IATTC Resolution [C-05-03](#)) and the introduction of best handling practices, which include the immediate release of sharks brought aboard the vessel. Counts of sharks released alive were included in the indices for the “all silky sharks” combined size category in previous reports ([SAC-05-11a](#); [SAC-06-08b](#); [SAC-07-06b\(i\)](#); [SAC-08-08a\(i\)](#); [SAC-09-13](#)) but not in the indices by size category, because of concerns about the accuracy of the observers’ classification to size categories of sharks recorded as released alive, which the observer may have seen only from a distance and/or for a very short period of time. Despite this concern, the transition to the large silky shark index as the most reliable stock status indicator, combined with recent increases in the number of live releases recorded for large silky sharks (see below; [Table 1](#)), means that live release of large silky sharks must now be taken into consideration in computing the index.

² Cutting the fins off sharks and discarding the carcass

This document presents two sets of indices for large silky sharks, for the EPO north and south of the equator, updated through 2019: one excludes data on live releases (as in previous reports) and the other includes those data. The index including live releases is considered more reliable, for reasons discussed below, and should be used as a basis for management advice. Also presented are preliminary results from a survey of observers on how their ability to evaluate the size of sharks released alive may be affected by factors such as where on the vessel and how they are released. Finally, several research topics aiming at improving the silky shark purse-seine indices are identified.

2. DATA AND METHODS

2.1. Indices of relative abundance

Data on bycatches of silky sharks collected by IATTC observers aboard Class-6³ purse-seine vessels during 1994-2019 were used to generate BPS-based indices of relative abundance for large silky sharks. Observers record bycatches of silky sharks, which occur predominantly in floating-object sets ([SAC-07-07b](#)), by size category: small (<90 cm total length (TL)), medium (90-150 cm TL), and large (>150 cm TL), roughly reflecting life stages (juveniles correspond to the small and medium categories, adults to the large category). Counts of large silky sharks recorded as released alive from the deck of the vessel, available since late 2004, were also used in the analyses. Since 2010, the proportion of large silky sharks recorded as released alive has increased almost fivefold ([Table 1](#)), so two indices for large silky sharks are now computed, one excluding and one including large silky sharks recorded by the observer as released alive. (As noted above, in previous reports, animals recorded as released alive were included in the “all silky shark” category, but not in the individual size subcategories.) Annual summaries of the spatial distribution of bycatch rates during 1994-2019 are shown in [Figure 1a-d](#).

BPS trends for large silky sharks in floating-object sets were estimated using previously-developed generalized additive models (GAMs) (Minami *et al.* 2007). A zero-inflated negative binomial GAM was used to model the bycatch data from floating-object sets because of the large proportion of sets with zero bycatch and the existence of sets with large bycatches. Predictors used in this model were: year (factor); smooth terms for latitude, longitude, time of set, and day of the year (to capture seasonal patterns); and linear terms for depth of the purse-seine net, depth of the floating object, sea surface temperature, natural logarithm of bycatches of species other than silky sharks, natural logarithm of tuna catch, and two proxies for local floating-object density. Trends for large silky sharks were computed from the fitted GAM, using an area-weighted approach. The annual index value was the sum of predicted BPS on a 1° grid, with values of covariates other than latitude, longitude and year fixed at their medians over the entire time period and spatial grid. The indices presented in reports prior to 2019 were based on the method of partial dependence (Hastie *et al.* 2009), which produces a data-weighted index. Data-weighted approaches give more influence in the trend estimation to areas with more sets, whereas the area-weighted approach gives equal weight to all areas, and is therefore preferred. As in previous years, trends were computed for the EPO north and south of the equator. Pointwise approximate 95% confidence intervals for the trends were computed from 500 simulated indices generated by resampling GAM parameters from a multivariate normal distribution with means, variances and covariances of the estimated model coefficients (Wood 2006), assuming known smoothing parameters and negative binomial scale parameters. Approximate 95% confidence intervals were obtained by applying the percentile method (Efron 1982) to the 500 simulated index values at each time point.

2.2. Observer survey on size estimation of sharks released alive

Given the increase in the number of live releases of silky sharks reported in recent years ([Table 1](#)), and the

³ Carrying capacity > 363 t

possible differences by size category (life stage) in the effects of interannual variability in oceanographic conditions on silky shark abundance (Lennert-Cody *et al.* 2019), improving the estimates of the size composition of silky shark bycatches is desirable. If indices by size category are to be used to monitor stock status, it is important to know whether live release requirements affect the observers' ability to estimate shark length (and, if so, how), and therefore potentially bias estimates of size composition, which will in turn affect estimates of indices of relative abundance by size category, as well as total bycatch by size category. Prior to late 2004, observers estimated the length of sharks caught, but since then they have been required to measure silky sharks if possible, and estimate the lengths of those they cannot measure. However, since the prohibition of 'finning' in 2005, and the introduction of best practices that require sharks brought aboard a vessel to be returned to the water as rapidly as possible, it is likely that sharks have been generally less visible to observers, and/or visible for shorter periods of time, and it is not known whether the increase in the proportion of animals recorded as released alive introduced bias into the numbers of sharks by size category.

A survey was therefore developed to collect information on how the observers' ability to evaluate shark size for sharks released alive may be affected by factors such as the release location aboard the vessel and the release method. The survey was posted online in mid-February, and as of late March, had been completed by 76 observers from the AIDCP program. Responses from observers are still being collected, and a full report on the results will be presented at the SAC meeting in 2021; in this document we present a preliminary summary of their replies to some of the main survey questions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Indices of relative abundance

Relative to 2018, the 2019 index values for large silky sharks were similar or slightly lower ([Figure 2](#)). In both the north and south EPO, the indices that include data on live releases show a somewhat less pessimistic long-term trend than those that do not include those data. These two indices (with and without live release data) may bracket the trend that would have resulted if finning, shark handling, and data recording practices had all remained unchanged since 1994. The trend based on counts of dead sharks only may be too pessimistic, given the increased efforts in recent years to release sharks alive. Conversely, the index that includes live-release data may be too optimistic, because live releases were not recorded prior to 2005; however, given the physical trauma caused by brailing⁴ and the lack of emphasis on immediate release of sharks from the deck, combined with unrestricted finning practices, it is likely (but not certain) that few or no live releases occurred prior to 2005. Therefore, the index including live releases should be used as a basis for management advice.

Although the index for large silky sharks was found to be the least correlated with interannual variability in oceanographic conditions, it may still be influenced by changing ocean climate. Without knowledge of the specific environmental processes affecting the index, however, those processes cannot be explicitly modelled to mitigate bias. At present, the only option would be to include the PDO as a covariate in the BPS standardization model. This will introduce variability (and potentially bias) into the index, as the empirical relationship between the PDO and BPS evolves with the addition of new data to both data sets. Moreover, unless the effects of movement are explicitly modelled, including the PDO in the BPS standardization model could be problematic because of confounding of the PDO and year effects, potentially biasing the estimated trend. Finally, the treatment of oceanographic processes will depend on whether they are believed to impact shark density (*via* movement, for example) or reflect environmentally-mediated changes in catchability. The Pacific-wide silky shark assessment of Clarke *et al.* (2018) could not fit to indices of relative abundance for the EPO and the western Pacific simultaneously,

⁴ Recent studies (Poisson *et al.* 2014, Eddy *et al.* 2015, Hutchinson *et al.* 2015) indicate that sharks that are brought aboard the vessel in the brailer with the tuna catch suffer trauma leading to low post-release survival.

even though several scenarios for basin-scale movement dynamics were considered. This may indicate that movement is not driving the correlation of the silky shark indices with the PDO, or it may indicate model mis-specification; tagging data were not available for the Pacific-wide assessment model to evaluate movement hypotheses or estimate movement parameters. Therefore, it is desirable that the planned work on Project [H.5.a](#) be expanded to obtain a better understanding of the effects of interannual variability in oceanographic conditions on silky shark distribution and movement in the tropical Pacific Ocean.

As noted previously ([SAC-07-06b\(i\)](#), [SAC-07-06b\(iii\)](#), [SAC-08-11](#)), reliable catch data for all fisheries catching silky sharks in the EPO, indices of relative abundance for fisheries other than purse-seine (*e.g.*, longline fisheries, which take the majority of the catch), and composition data, by length/age and sex, continue to be vital. This is particularly the case given the increased concern about the reliability of the purse-seine indices. Progress is being made on collection of data from the artisanal fleets of Central America (SAC-11-14), where sampling programs are being implemented to collect data to estimate the species and size composition of the shark catch. Estimates of absolute abundance (*e.g.* as derived from close kin mark-recapture methods) are essential for putting the catch estimates in context with respect to fishing mortality rates and demographic parameters.

3.2. Observer survey on size estimation of sharks released alive

The responses to date to the survey on factors that may affect the observer's determination of the size of sharks released alive can be summarized as follows:

1. The location on the vessel and method of live release vary somewhat by shark size ([Figure 3](#)). Most often sharks considered alive were released directly to the water from the brailer or from the working deck after being brailed aboard the vessel. However, the majority of small sharks are released directly from the brailer, whereas the majority of large sharks are released from the working deck after being brailed.
2. Almost all observers felt very confident in their determination of shark size, as well as the number of sharks, if the animals were unloaded from the brailer to the working deck before being returned to the water or were unloaded from the brailer to the water using a stretcher ([Figure 4](#)). However, over 20% of observers expressed uncertainty about the size of sharks released directly from the brailer to the water. This would seem to be more a concern for small and medium sharks than large sharks ([Figure 3](#)). Less than 30% of observers were very confident about their size determinations of sharks entangled in the net that were released over the stern ([Figure 4](#)), however, this situation does not appear to be common ([Figure 3](#)).
3. Since 2017, when there was a considerable increase in live releases ([Table 1](#)), release directly from the brailer to the water, with or without the use of a stretcher, has become more common, and release from the brailer to the water via the working deck less common ([Figure 5](#)).

These preliminary results suggest that overall, observers are fairly confident in their ability to estimate the size category of sharks released alive, and that the release location and method are less likely to affect the determination of size for larger sharks than for smaller sharks. Final survey results will be presented at SAC-12 and any implications for data collection discussed at that time.

4. FUTURE WORK

Based on the results presented in this document and other recent work, the following should be considered in future work on indices of abundance for silky sharks in the EPO:

1. **Identify options for improving the shark length sampling protocol** for on-board observers (SSP, Target

B.1: Evaluate and improve data collected by the purse-seine on-board observer program for scientific research).

2. **Investigate field study options, such as tagging studies, to evaluate the relationship between the abundance and distribution of silky sharks and interannual variability in environmental conditions in the tropical Pacific.** Because of its scope, such a study would have to be collaborative, involving coastal nations of the EPO and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). While tagging studies conducted recently in the Pacific (Hutchinson *et al.* 2019; Schaefer *et al.*, 2019) showed the potential for considerable movement by silky sharks, they cannot inform on whether movements are related to interannual variability in oceanographic conditions. Analysis of tagging data, in conjunction with habitat modeling of fisheries data (*e.g.*, Lopez *et al.* 2017) would lead to a better understanding of the oceanographic processes that contribute to interannual variability in the silky shark indices.
3. **Expand Project H.5.a** to include additional research so as to better understand the correlation between silky shark indices and environmental indices. It could also be expanded to include development of models that integrate data from the western and central Pacific Ocean, as well as longline data.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend a special ‘thank you’ to IATTC field office staff for their assistance with development of the survey, to IATTC field office staff and national observer program staff for their efforts to make observers aware of the survey, and to AIDCP observers for taking time to complete the online survey.

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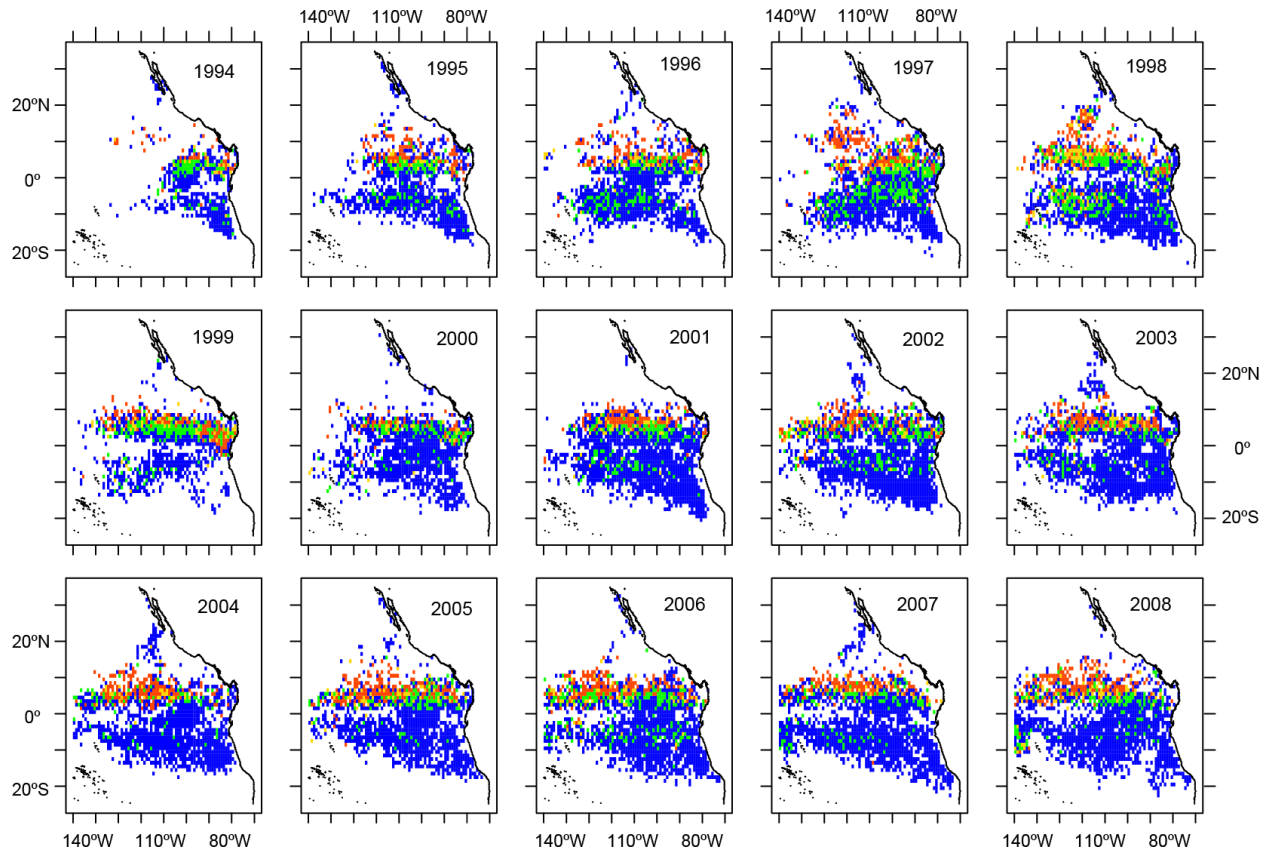


FIGURE 1a. Average bycatch per set, in numbers, of small (<90 cm total length) silky sharks in floating-object sets, 1994-2019, including live releases since late 2004. Sharks per set: blue, 0; green, ≤ 1 ; yellow, 1-2; red: > 2 .

FIGURA 1a. Captura incidental media por lance, en número, de tiburones sedosos pequeños (<90 cm de talla total) en lances sobre objetos flotantes, 1994-2019, incluyendo liberaciones en vivo desde finales de 2004. Tiburones por lance: azul, 0; verde, ≤ 1 ; amarillo, 1-2; rojo, > 2 .

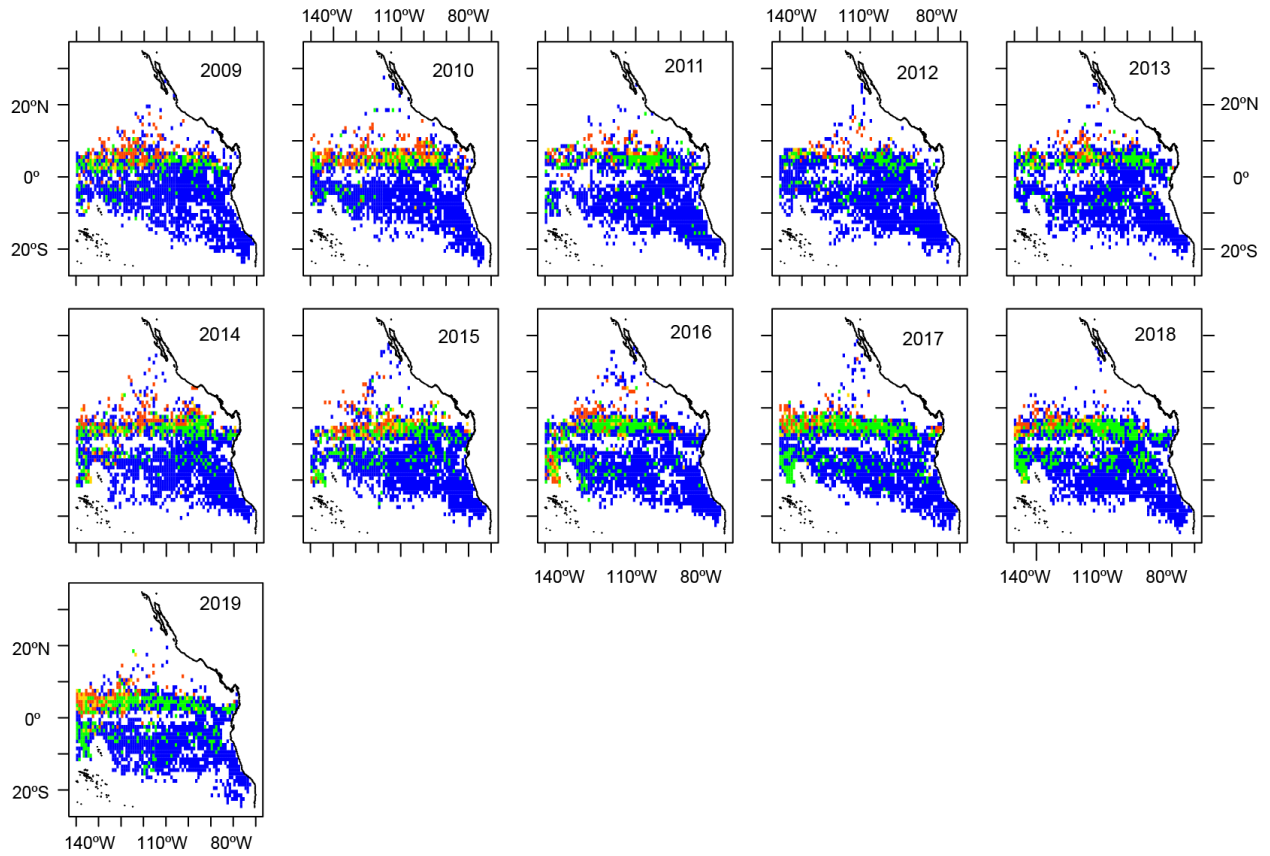


FIGURE 1a. (cont.)

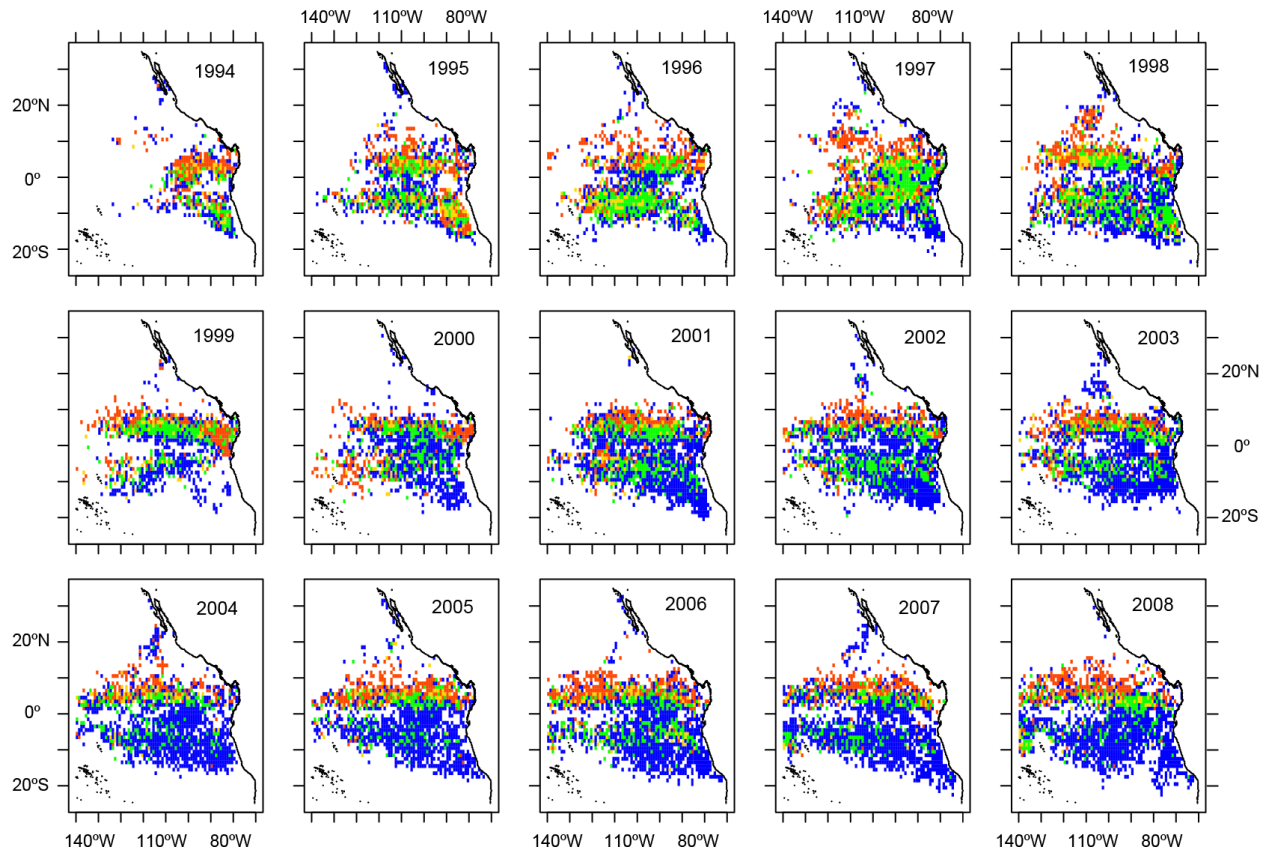


FIGURE 1b. Average bycatch per set, in numbers, of medium (90-150 cm total length) silky sharks in floating-object sets, 1994-2019, including live releases since late 2004. Sharks per set: blue, 0; green, ≤ 1 ; yellow, 1-2; red: >2 .

FIGURA 1b. Captura incidental media por lance, en número, de tiburones sedosos medianos (90-150 cm de talla total) en lances sobre objetos flotantes, 1994-2019, incluyendo liberaciones en vivo desde finales de 2004. Tiburones por lance: azul, 0; verde, ≤ 1 ; amarillo, 1-2; rojo, >2 .

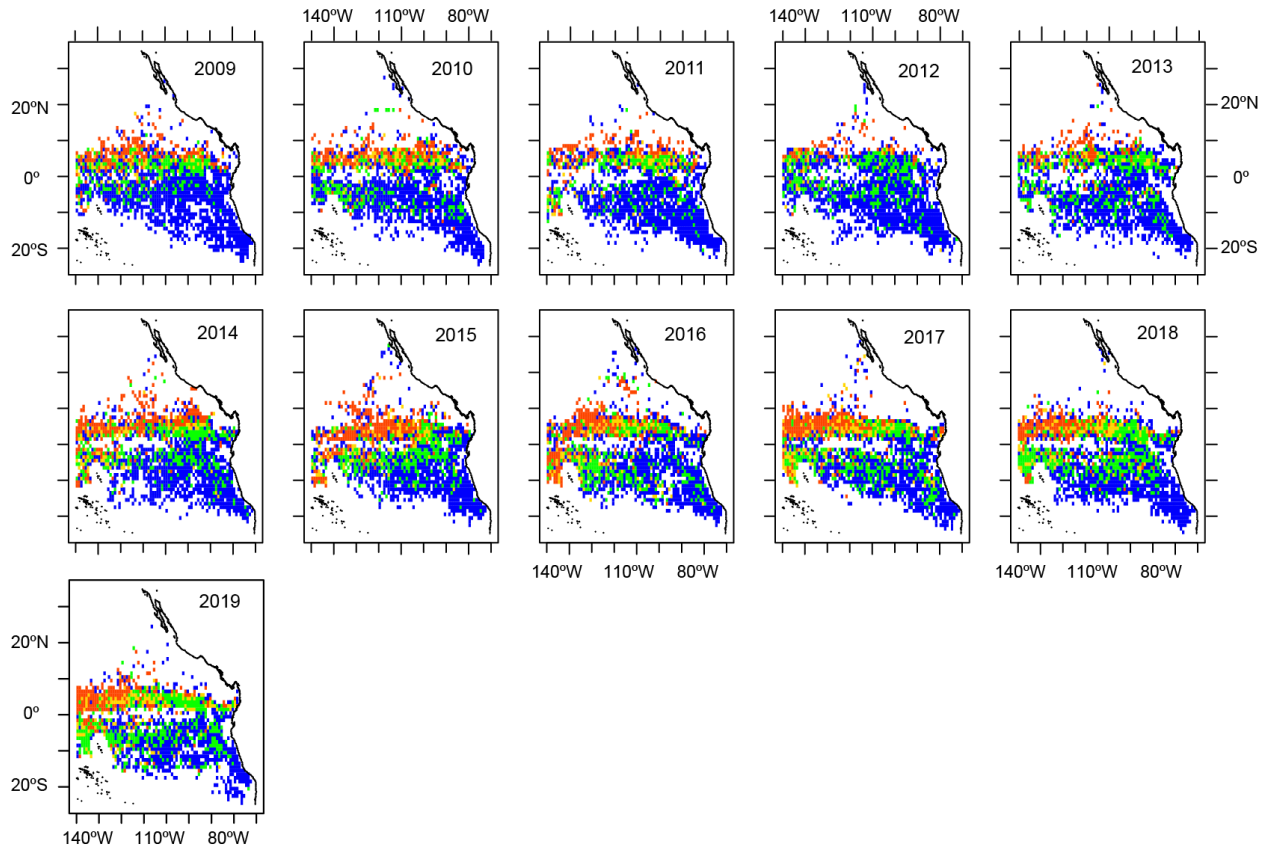


FIGURE 1b. (Cont.)

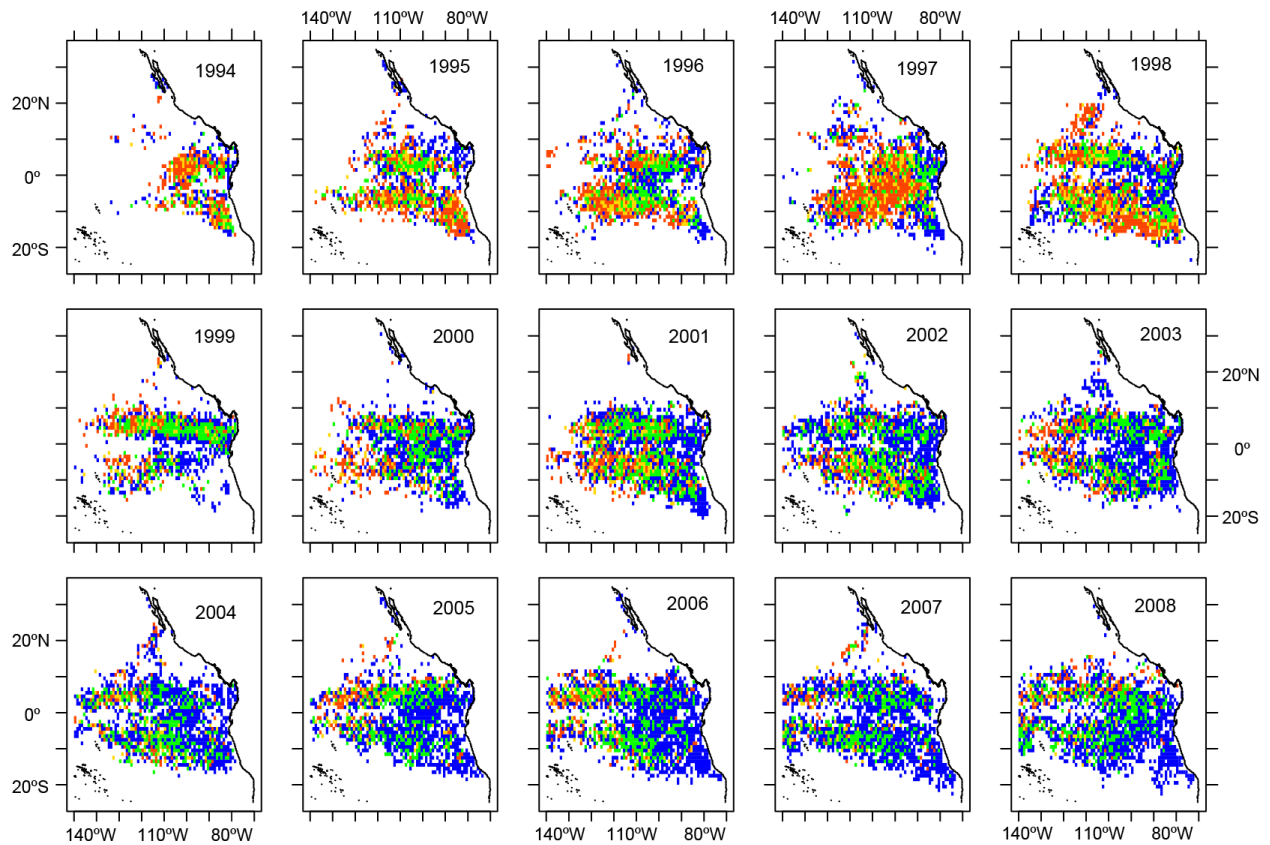


FIGURE 1c. Average bycatch per set, in numbers, of large (> 150 cm total length) silky sharks in floating-object sets, 1994-2019, including live releases since late 2004. Sharks per set: blue, 0; green, ≤ 1 ; yellow, 1-2; red: >2.

FIGURA 1c. Captura incidental media por lance, en número, de tiburones sedosos grandes (> 150 cm de talla total) en lances sobre objetos flotantes, 1994-2019, incluyendo liberaciones en vivo desde finales de 2004. Tiburones por lance: azul, 0; verde, ≤ 1 ; amarillo, 1-2; rojo, >2.

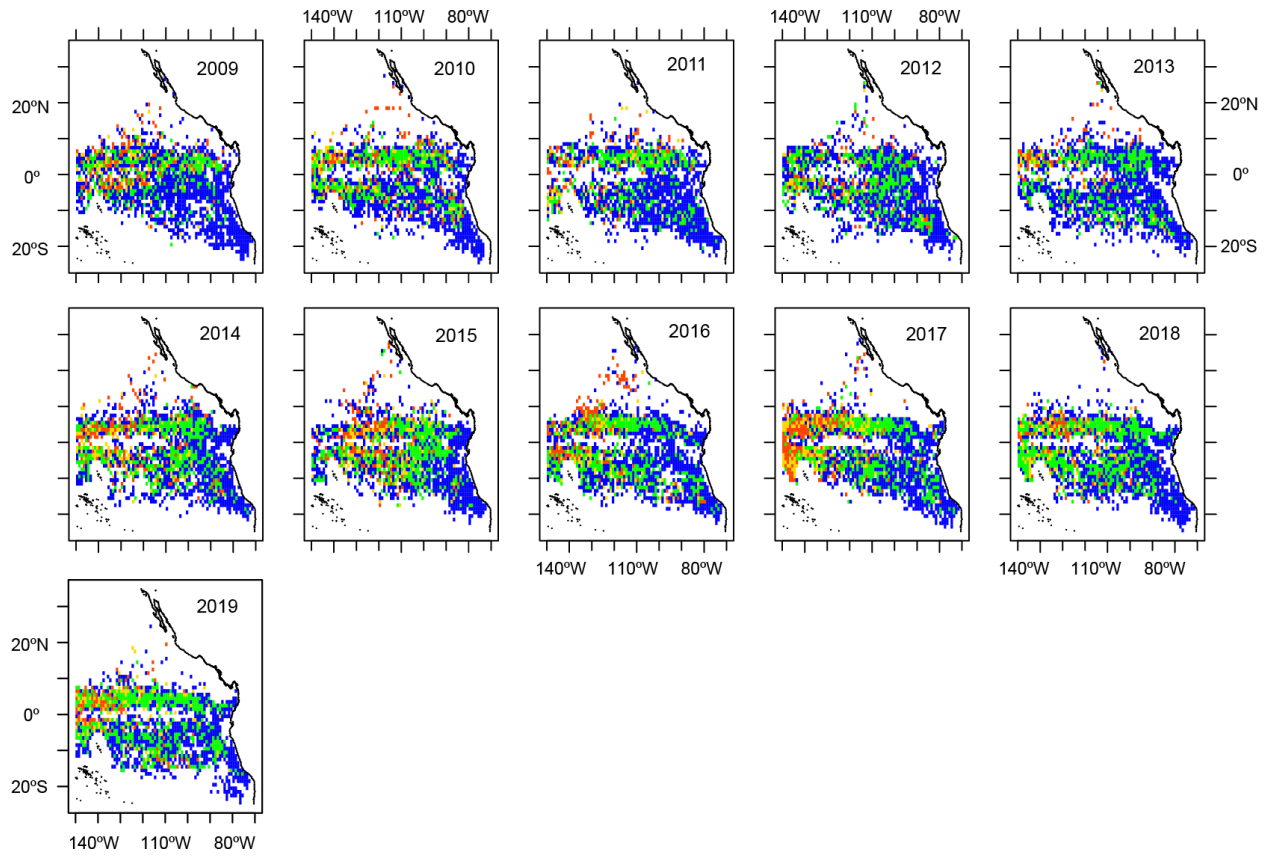


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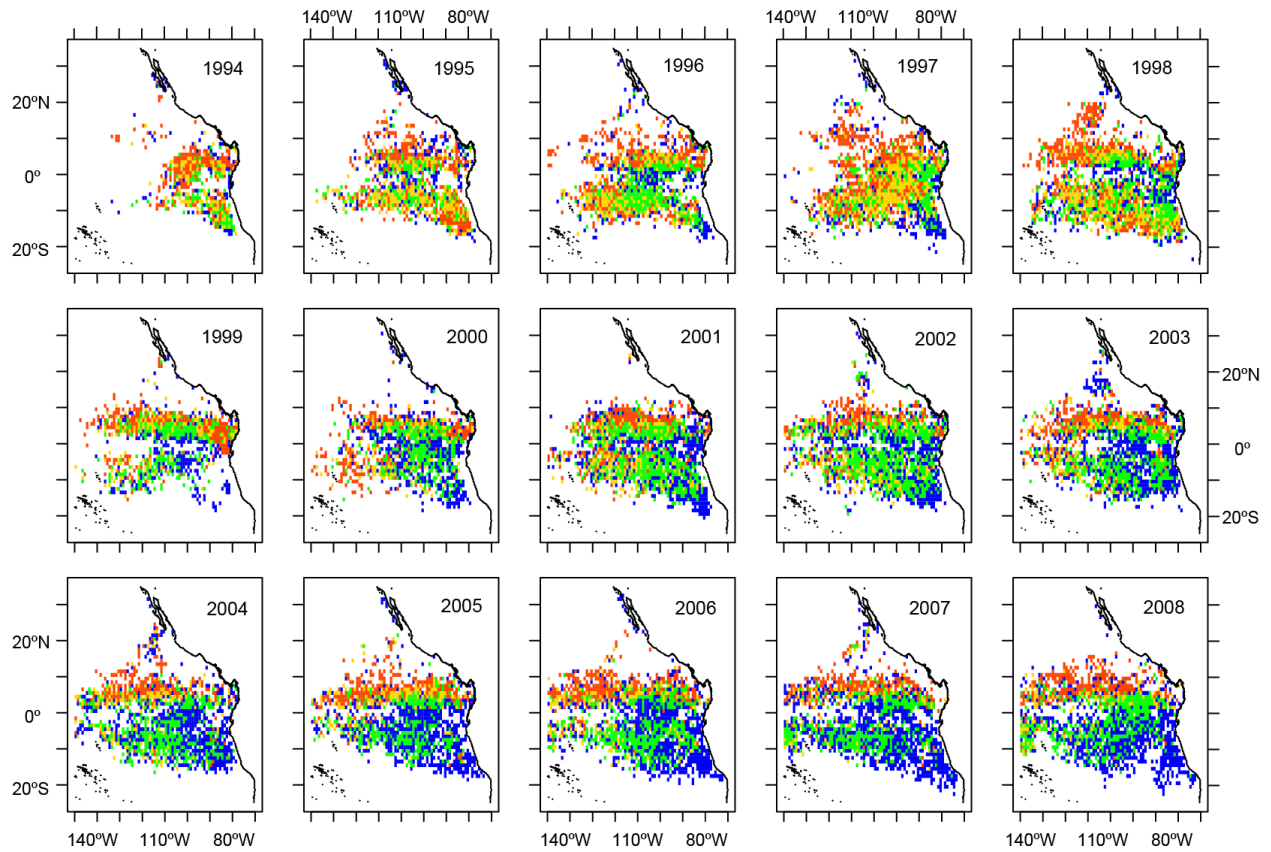


FIGURE 1d. Average bycatch per set in floating-object sets, in numbers, of all silky sharks, including live release since late 2004, for 1994-2019. Sharks per set: blue: 0; green: ≤ 2 ; yellow: 2-5; red: > 5 .

FIGURA 1d. Captura incidental media por lance, en número, de todos los tiburones sedosos en lances sobre objetos flotantes, 1994-2019, incluyendo liberaciones en vivo desde finales de 2004. Tiburones por lance: azul, 0; verde, ≤ 2 ; amarillo, 2-5; rojo, > 5 .

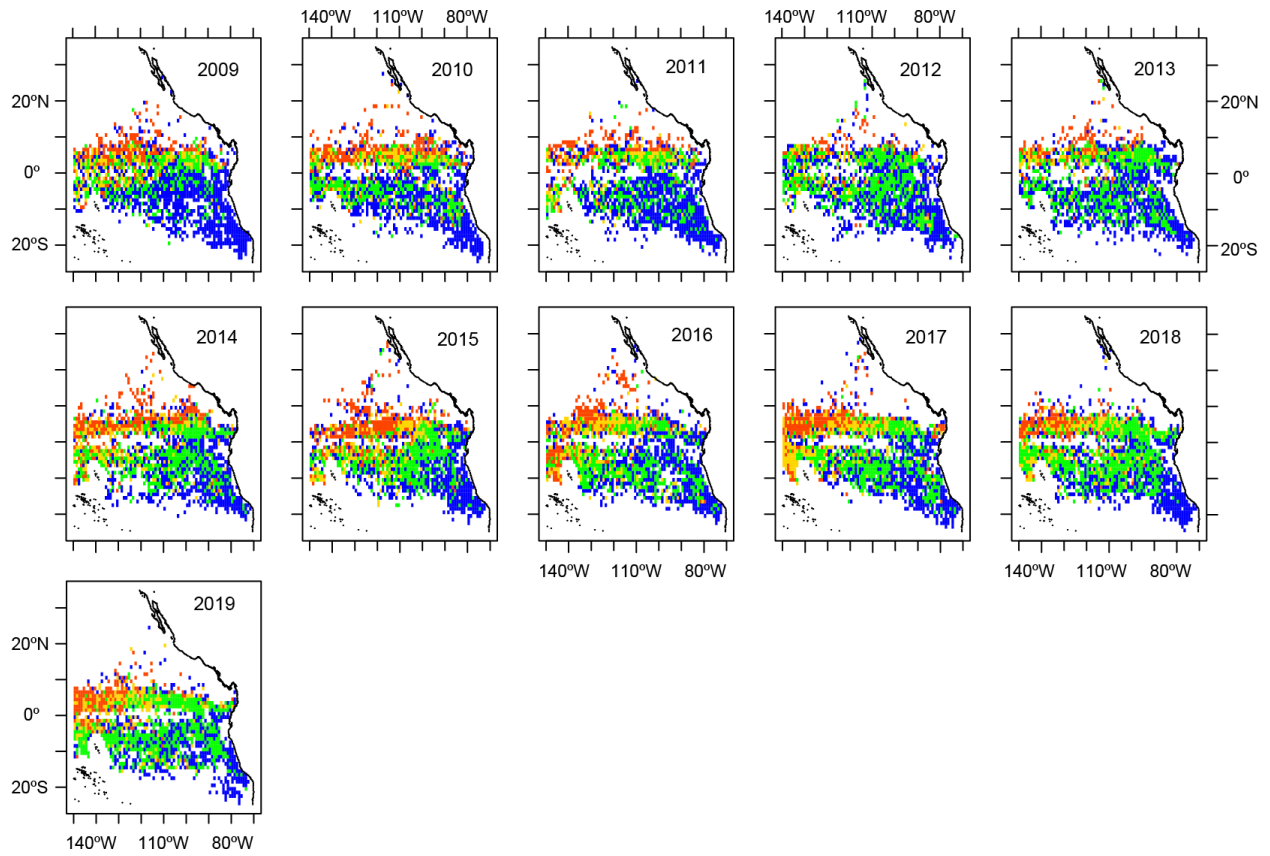


FIGURE 1d. (Cont.)

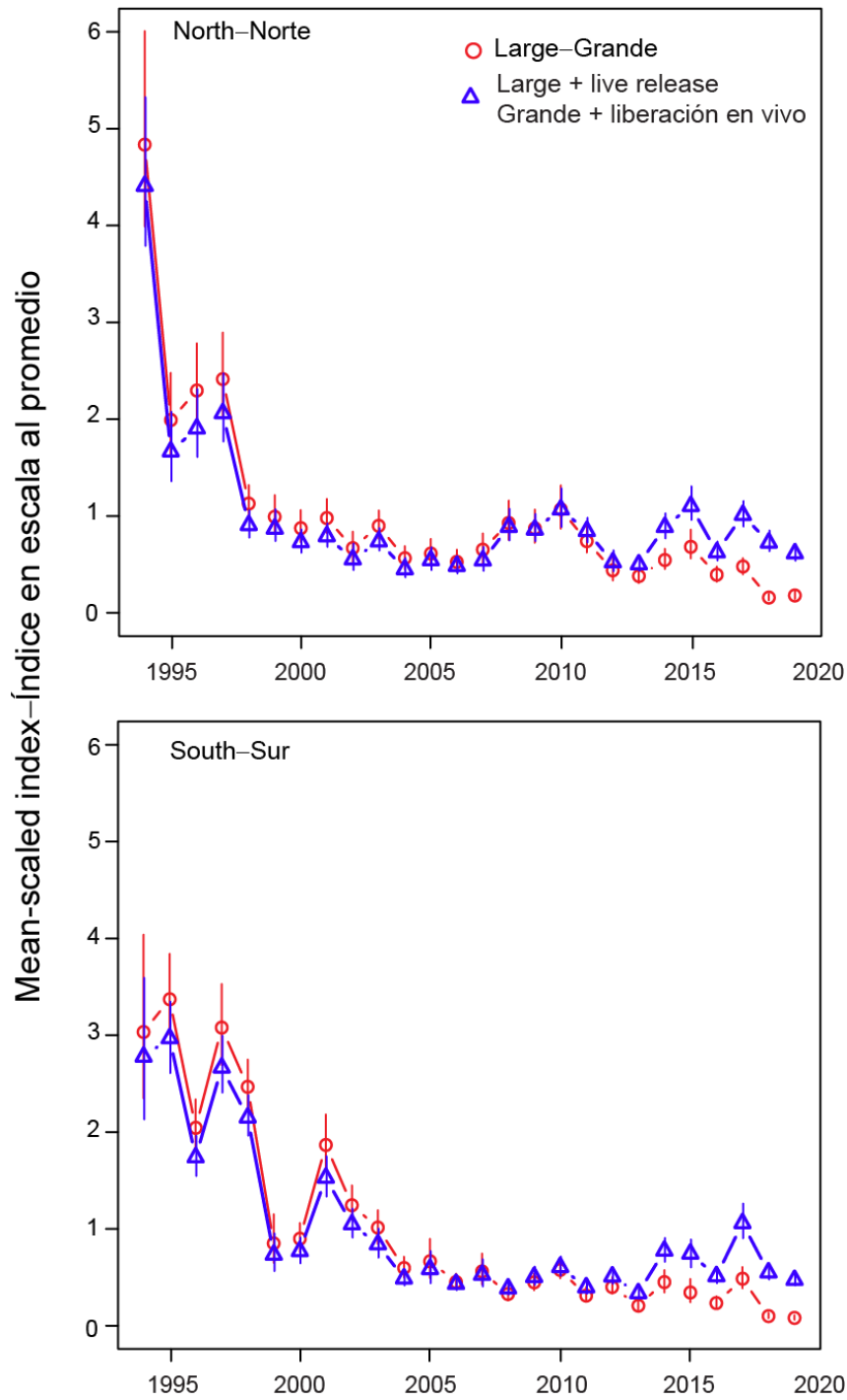


FIGURE 2. Mean-scaled standardized bycatch-per-set (BPS; in numbers of sharks per set) of large silky sharks in sets on floating objects, with and without live release, in the north (top) and south (bottom) EPO. Vertical bars indicate pointwise approximate 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURA 2. Captura incidental por lance (CIPL, en número de tiburones por lance) estandarizada de tiburones sedosos grandes en lances sobre objetos flotantes, con y sin liberación en vivo, en el OPO norte (arriba) y sur (abajo). Las barras verticales indican los intervalos de confianza de 95% puntuales aproximados.

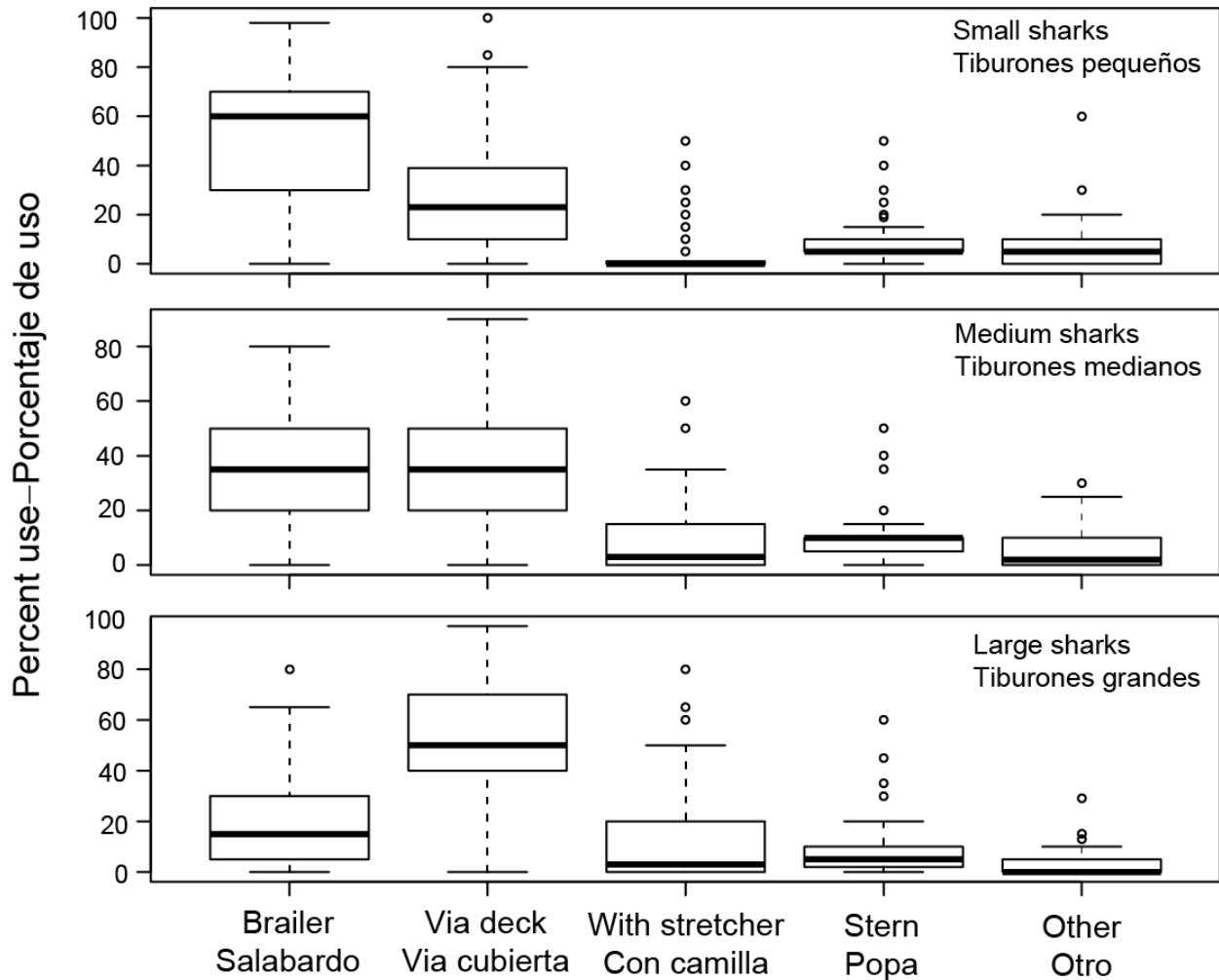


FIGURE 3. Use of release locations/methods, by size of shark. “Brailer/Salabardo”: released directly to the water from the brailer; “Via deck/Vía cubierta”: released from the brailer to the working deck and then into the water; “With stretcher/Con camilla”: released from the brailer to the water using a stretcher; “Stern/Popa”: released over the stern (for sharks entangled in the net); “Other/Otro”: released from a different location/using another method.

FIGURA 3: Uso de lugares/métodos de liberación, por talla del tiburón. “Brailer/Salabardo”: liberados directamente al agua desde el salabardo; “Via deck/Vía cubierta”: liberados desde el salabardo a la cubierta de trabajo y luego al agua; “With stretcher/Con camilla”: liberados desde el salabardo al agua usando una camilla; “Stern/Popa”: liberados por la popa (para tiburones enredados en la red); “Other/Otro”: liberados desde un lugar diferente/usando otro método.

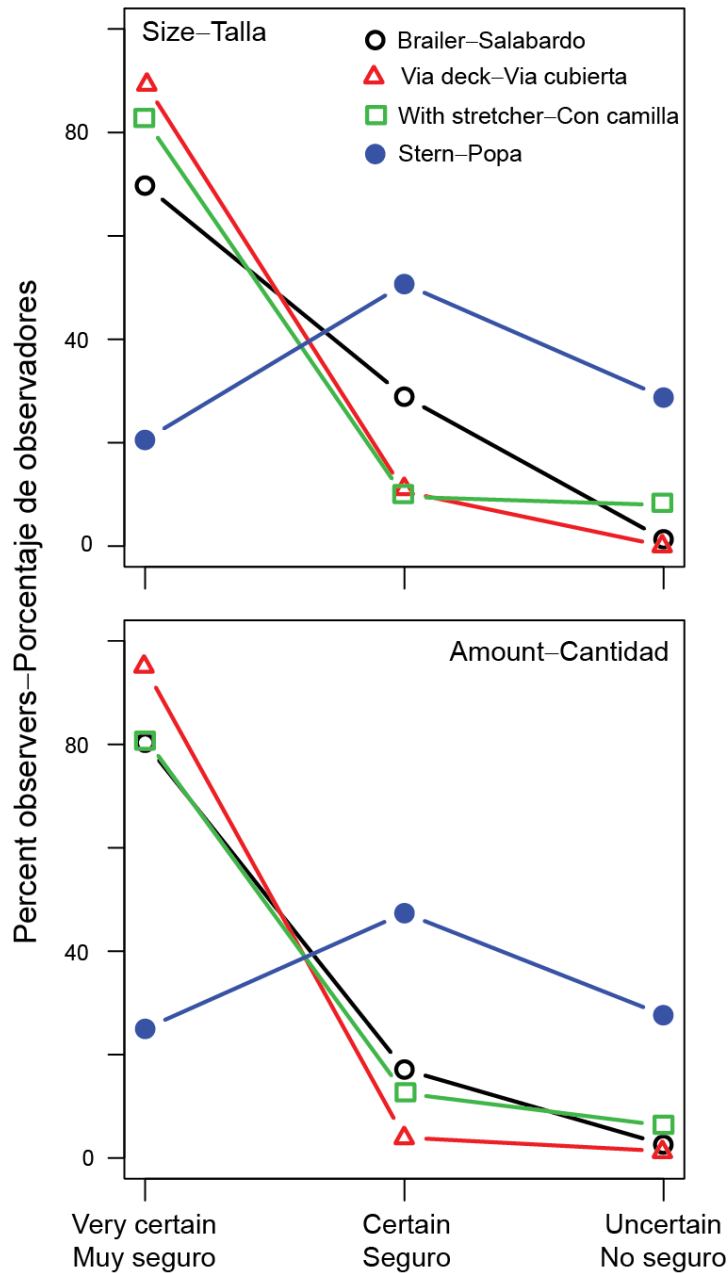


FIGURE 4. Certainty of observers about their ability to estimate the size (top panel) and amount (bottom panel) of sharks. “Brailer/Salabardo”: released directly to the water from the brailer; “Via deck/Vía cubierta”: released from the brailer to the working deck and then into the water; “With stretcher/Con camilla”: released from the brailer to the water using a stretcher; “Stern/Popa”: released over the stern (for sharks entangled in the net).

FIGURA 4: Certeza de los observadores sobre su capacidad para estimar la talla (panel superior) y cantidad (panel inferior) de tiburones. “Brailer/Salabardo”: liberados directamente al agua desde el salabardo; “Via deck/Vía cubierta”: liberados desde el salabardo a la cubierta de trabajo y luego al agua; “With stretcher/Con camilla”: liberados desde el salabardo al agua usando una camilla; “Stern/Popa”: liberados por la popa (para tiburones enredados en la red).

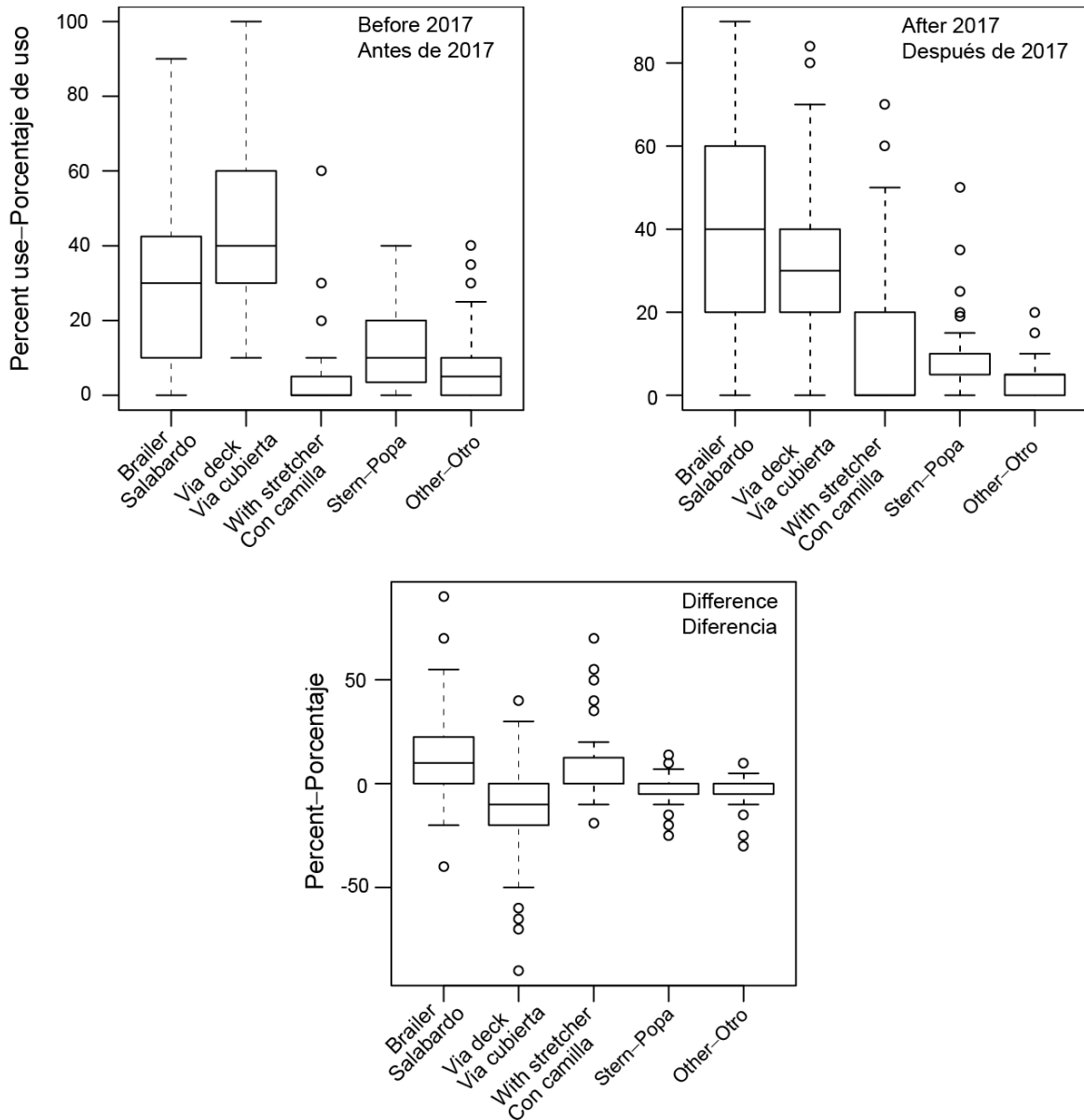


FIGURE 5. Use of the different release locations/methods before and after 2017, and percentage difference in use between the two periods. “Brailer/Salabardo”: released directly to the water from the brailer; “Via deck/Vía cubierta”: released from the brailer to the working deck and then into the water; “With stretcher/Con camilla”: released from the brailer to the water using a stretcher; “Stern/Popa”: released over the stern (for sharks entangled in the net).

FIGURA 5: Uso de los diferentes lugares/métodos de liberación antes y después de 2017, y diferencia porcentual de uso entre los dos periodos. “Brailer/Salabardo”: liberados directamente al agua desde el salabardo; “Via deck/Vía cubierta”: liberados desde el salabardo a la cubierta de trabajo y luego al agua; “With stretcher/Con camilla”: liberados desde el salabardo al agua usando una camilla; “Stern/Popa”: liberados por la popa (para tiburones enredados en la red); “Other/Otro”: liberados desde un lugar diferente/usando otro método.

TABLE 1. Percentages of silky sharks recorded as released alive, by size category and for all silky sharks, in floating-object sets in the EPO, 2004-2019 (IATTC observer data). Data collection began in late 2004, so the data for 2004 are incomplete.

TABLA 1. Porcentajes de tiburones sedosos registrados como liberados vivos, por categoría de talla y para todos los tiburones sedosos, en lances sobre objetos flotantes en el OPO, 2004-2019 (datos de observadores de la CIAT). La recolección de datos comenzó a finales de 2004, por lo que los datos de 2004 están incompletos.

%	Small	Medium	Large	All
	Pequeños	Medianos	Grandes	Todos
2004	2.9	0.9	0.1	1.4
2005	2.8	3.3	4.4	3.3
2006	5.4	4.9	8.1	5.6
2007	6.2	5.4	7.4	6
2008	3.9	6.2	12.4	6.2
2009	4.9	9.7	15.5	10.5
2010	13.4	17.3	17.5	15.7
2011	16.7	14.6	31.3	18.6
2012	10.3	17.2	28.6	20.1
2013	28.2	22.3	34.3	26
2014	29.4	34.5	45.9	36.5
2015	27.9	34.7	46.2	38.5
2016	32.2	38.9	44	38.6
2017	45.8	52.6	61.7	54.3
2018	43.4	64.8	85	65.5
2019	46.2	69.2	79.6	67.2