Characteristics of juvenile survivors reveal spatio-temporal differences in early life stage survival of Baltic cod

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The spatio-temporal origin of surviving juvenile Baltic cod Gadus morhua was investigated by coupling age information from otolith microstructure analysis and hydrodynamic modeling, which allowed backtracking of drift routes in time and space. The suitability of hydrodynamic modeling for drift simulations of early life stages of Baltic cod up to the pelagic juvenile stage was validated by comparing model simulations with the catch distribution from a survey targeting pelagic juveniles, and mortality rates and hatch date distributions of pelagic and demersal juveniles were estimated. Hatch dates and hatch locations of juvenile survivors showed distinct patterns which did not agree well with the abundance and spatial distribution of eggs, suggesting marked spatio-temporal differences in larval survival. The good agreement of the spatio-temporal origin of survivors from this field investigation with previous modeling studies on the survival chances of early-stage larvae and with general spatio-temporal patterns of larval prey availability suggests that differences in survival are related to food availability during the early larval stage. Results are discussed in relation to the recruitment process of Baltic cod, in particular with respect to the critical period and match-mismatch hypotheses, and to possible implications for the placement of a Marine Protected Area which was established to ensure undisturbed spawning of Baltic cod.

General information
State: Published
Organisations: National Institute of Aquatic Resources, Section for Marine Ecology and Oceanography, Institute Management, GEOMAR - Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel, Thünen Institute of Baltic Sea Fisheries, University of Kiel
Authors: Huwer, B. (Intern), Hinrichsen, H. (Ekstern), Böttcher, U. (Ekstern), Voss, R. (Ekstern), Köster, F. (Intern)
Pages: 165-180
Publication date: 2014
Main Research Area: Technical/natural sciences

Publication information
Journal: Marine Ecology Progress Series
Volume: 511
ISSN (Print): 0171-8630
Ratings:
BFI (2017): BFI-level 2
Web of Science (2017): Indexed Yes
BFI (2016): BFI-level 2
Scopus rating (2016): CiteScore 2.4
Web of Science (2016): Indexed yes
BFI (2015): BFI-level 2
Scopus rating (2015): CiteScore 2.56
Web of Science (2015): Indexed yes
BFI (2014): BFI-level 2
Scopus rating (2014): CiteScore 2.75
Web of Science (2014): Indexed yes
BFI (2013): BFI-level 2
Scopus rating (2013): CiteScore 2.79
ISI indexed (2013): ISI indexed yes
Web of Science (2013): Indexed yes
BFI (2012): BFI-level 2
Scopus rating (2012): CiteScore 2.9
ISI indexed (2012): ISI indexed yes
Web of Science (2012): Indexed yes
BFI (2011): BFI-level 2
Scopus rating (2011): CiteScore 2.85
ISI indexed (2011): ISI indexed yes
Web of Science (2011): Indexed yes
BFI (2010): BFI-level 2
Web of Science (2010): Indexed yes
BFI (2009): BFI-level 2
Web of Science (2009): Indexed yes