Long-term retrospective analysis of mackerel spawning in the North Sea: A new time series and modeling approach to CPR data

We present a unique view of mackerel (Scomber scombrus) in the North Sea based on a new time series of larvae caught by the Continuous Plankton Recorder (CPR) survey from 1948-2005, covering the period both before and after the collapse of the North Sea stock. Hydrographic backtrack modelling suggested that the effect of advection is very limited between spawning and larvae capture in the CPR survey. Using a statistical technique not previously applied to CPR data, we then generated a larval index that accounts for both catchability as well as spatial and temporal autocorrelation. The resulting time series documents the significant decrease of spawning from before 1970 to recent depleted levels.

Spatial distributions of the larvae, and thus the spawning area, showed a shift from early to recent decades, suggesting that the central North Sea is no longer as important as the areas further west and south. These results provide a consistent and unique perspective on the dynamics of mackerel in this region and can potentially resolve many of the unresolved questions about this stock.

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