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Report of the piston-line trolling monitoring survey for the age-1 southern bluefin tuna recruitment index in 2022

ミナミマグロ 1 歳魚の加入指標のための
ピストンライン曳縄モニタリング調査 2022 の結果報告

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要約

ミナミマグロ *Thunnus maccoyii* 1 歳魚の加入指数を求める曳縄調査を、2022 年 2 月に実施した。Esperance から Bremer Bay までの海域を調査し、ピストンラインは 13 本を探索した。COVID-19 の影響で計画の変更を余儀なくされ、調査項目は縮小したものの、調査期間及び調査海域は 2020 年以前と同様の規模で実施できた。航海を通じて漁獲したミナミマグロは 48 個体で、94%は 1 歳魚と推定された。

Summary

In February 2022, the trolling survey that provides the data for recruitment index of age-1 southern bluefin tuna *Thunnus maccoyii* (SBT) was carried out. Due to the global epidemic of COVID-19, the survey was forced to make major changes from the plan to reduce the number of survey items, however, the numbers of survey days and extent of the survey area where from Esperance to Bremer Bay were as large as those before 2020. During the survey, a total of 48 SBT individuals, 94% of them were presumably age-1, were caught.

1. Introduction

Recruitment level is crucial information on stock management of fish, including southern bluefin tuna (*Thunnus maccoyii*, SBT). Several research activities have been attempted for the recruitment monitoring of SBT. Since 1989, Japan has conducted a series of recruitment monitoring survey within a cooperative research framework with Australian scientists. Japan carried out a trolling and pole-and-line catch monitoring survey from 1989 to 1993, and then carried out an acoustic monitoring survey using sonar and echo sounder from 1995 to 2006, for age-1 SBT distributed off the southern coast of Western Australia (Itoh 2006). The recruitment index derived from the acoustic monitoring survey predicted the low recruitment levels of the 1999-2001 year classes of SBT which was confirmed several years later by the model-based assessment so that it was likely to be a reliable index. However, the survey was ceased after the final survey in 2006 due to the budget restriction. Alternatively, we have carried out a trolling survey since 2006. Australia had carried out a scientific aerial survey in the Great Australian Bight in South Australia since 1993 and provided the recruitment indices, as the aerial survey index, to CCSBT (Eveson et al. 2006). The aerial survey was discontinued after 2017 because of budgetary reason and logistical problems. Since 2016, pilot Gene Tagging (GT) project has been started instead of the aerial survey. GT estimates the absolute amount of resources of age-2 SBT and utilized in the current Management Procedure (MP).

The trolling survey is a reasonable way to know the recruitment status of age-1 SBT. The recruitment index of age-1 SBT derived from this survey have provided to CCSBT as a fishery independent indicator and robustness test for MP. This survey finds SBT schools by trolling off the southwestern Australia. Additionally, we set the single straight transect line in the survey area and are investigating intensively each year on this line (Itoh and Kurota 2006). This survey is a long-term survey covering 16 years from 2006 to 2020 (Itoh 2021a, Itoh and Kurota 2006, Itoh and Sakai 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2010, Itoh et al. 2011, 2012a, 2013, Itoh and Tokuda 2014, Itoh and Tsuda 2016, 2020a, Tsuda and Itoh 2017a, 2018a, 2019a). The long time series data can be expected to detect not only the interannual fluctuation of recruitment of age-1 SBT but also a medium-term trend of it. Additionally, the recruitment index from this survey become available immediately in the same year of the survey carried out, i.e. the time-lag from the survey to data become available is 0 year. On the other hand, the GT data has provided a short time series. The estimated absolute age-2 SBT abundance from GT has the time-lags of 2 years from sampling to the data become available. Therefore, in order to find recruitment failure, if it occurred, as quick as possible and understand the recruitment trend roughly, it is necessary to continue the trolling survey for the age-1 SBT.

In February 2021, due to the global epidemic of COVID-19, the trolling survey was

greatly affected, and the survey was conducted in a limited area in a short period of time. However, since it was confirmed that the survey could be conducted even in difficult logistic situations, it was decided to conduct the survey in January-February 2022 with the same extent in the number of days and area as before 2020. This paper describes the general results of the survey conducted in January-February 2022. The trolling index calculated from this survey data is described in another paper (Itoh 2022 CCSBT-ESC/2208/20).

2. Materials and methods

An Australian vessel, *The Southern Conquest* with 17 m in total length, was chartered (Fig. 1). This vessel was consistent to previous years.

The survey area was off the southern coast of Western Australia between off Esperance (123E) and east of Albany (117E), including off Bremer Bay (Fig. 2). The area covers about 450 km x 60 km. The continental shelf of about 70 m in depth extended largely from the coast, and then dropped sharply at shelf-edge to deeper than 500 m in depth within 2 km distance. The piston-line laid off Bremer Bay.

The vessels engaged in the survey from 6:00 to 17:00 and returned to a port or a calm bay everyday. GPS position data were recorded every second in a software for navigation, Navionics, and downloaded in the gpx format file later of the day. The vessel operated trolling at speed of 7-8 knots. Four trolling lines at maximum were trolled. Each line has one hook with a plastic lure. Because the trolling index derived from the survey is based on the number of SBT schools, not the total number of SBT individuals caught, we did not try to maximize the number of fish caught. Individual fish caught of any species were measured by its length. Some SBT were killed for stomach contents observation. Other SBT were its fork length (FL) measured and released.

Comparing to previous years, following points were different. While crew members were common, there was no researcher from Japan. Four trolling lines with one type of lure were used instead eight lines with three types of lures used in previous years. We didn't implemented archival tagging on SBT and oceanographic observation by CTD.

3. Results

The trolling survey started on January 31st and finished on February 26th in 2022. After three days survey off Esperance, the vessel moved to Bremer Bay on Feb. 11. They surveyed off Bremer Bay area for eight days, then returned to Esperance on Feb. 15. They further surveyed off Esperance on Feb. 26. In total, 14 days were surveyed though GPS

data acquisition failed in two days (Feb. 11 and 12). Thirteen surveys on the piston line were conducted on the day GPS data was obtained.

During the survey, a total of 59 fish were caught, including 48 SBT, 7 yellowtail kingfish *Seriola lalandi*, and 4 oriental bonito *Sarda orientalis*. 14 SBT were killed for stomach contents observation where pilchard *Sardinops sagax* was dominant. Total weight of SBT killed was estimated from fork length as 45.3 kg.

In general, the number of SBT caught was small, and the distribution density of SBT seemed to be low. Off Bremer Bay, lumps are expected to catch more fish each year, but this survey found less.

There are four size/age components of SBT in this area at the time of the year: age-0.3 in 30-35 cmFL, age-1.0 having mode at around 48 cmFL, age-1.3 in 57-63 cmFL, and age-2 in 65-80 cmFL (Itoh et al. 2012b). There are two sub-cohorts in age-1 presumably doe to different spawning peaks exists in October and January/February. SBT caught in 2022 ranged from 30 to 63 cmFL (Fig. 3). Estimated from fork length, age-1.0 fish was dominant, which is a usual pattern in previous years. Age-1 was 94% and age-0 was 6%.

4. Discussion

Fishery data are basic information to assess the current stock status of SBT in CCSBT. Especially, CPUE of Japanese longline, which covers wide area, season and SBT age range that based on detailed information reported from fishermen, is a long time series index more than 50 years for SBT stock status. The aerial survey was also valuable research. It covered a wide area in a short duration of time in the Great Australian Bight (GAB) by using airplane and data of school biomass is derived as an estimation of a spotter. However, there is no index that directly reflects the status of SBT stock in whole ranges in both age and geographical distribution. Therefore, we need to collect a variety of information as many as possible to assess the stock status appropriately. Trolling survey provides important information of age-1 SBT abundance.

The design of the trolling survey corresponds to the temporal and spatial distribution of age-1 SBT, although its survey period and geographic area are limited. A majority of age-1 SBT is thought to be distributed in the coastal area of Western Australia in austral summer (Itoh and Sakai 2009b). Then the age-1 SBT widely migrates to east and west at the end of the summer, although the majority of the SBT move to the GAB. SBT of age-2 and older are distributed so widely in the area between off New Zealand and off Cape, and the fish returns to GAB by the following year is not always. Therefore, the recruitment survey targeting age-1 SBT in the southern coast of Western Australia may provide

abundance index that represents whole the stock at age-1 SBT.

To derive accurate year trend in an index of recruitment level, we need to exclude other factors that fluctuate by year. Carrying out the survey in a consistent method for all years is a good way for this. We have not changed the gear specification used, and general research method for 16 years. We changed the survey vessel at the 10th and 12th survey, but the type and size of the vessels were consistent all the survey. The survey area has been consistent for 15 years except 2021 where the main survey area has been off Bremer Bay and carried out the piston-line survey. Such consistent survey design is expected to facilitate to obtain an index that reflects only for annual SBT recruitment change. Additionally, the trolling is robust survey method against environmental factors, including wind, wave, and swell. There were a few days that suspended the research during the cruise due to rough sea condition in 16 years. We did not find a tendency that SBT were less caught in rough weather condition (see Tsuda and Itoh 2017c CCSBT-ESC/1708/24).

Unfortunately, some of the consistencies were interrupted in 2021. In 2021, area covered was small, there were no observation on the piston-line, and fewer trolling lines were used. In 2022, while the area covered was back to large and observation on the piston-line were carried out, fewer trolling lines were used. We should be careful to interpret the recruitment index (TRG) after the 2021 data.

Agreements of trends were observed between the trolling survey indices derived from this survey and several recruitment indices from the CCSBT stock assessment, e.g., recruitment output from the Operating Model and nominal CPUE of age-4 SBT in Japanese longline (Itoh 2014). Up to now, the trolling survey appeared to succeed in providing data for the recruitment index that represents the whole age-1 SBT stock. Then, there is no need to change the current survey design so far.

However, it does not guarantee the survey design to be appropriate in the future. There are several concerns to be pointed out relating representativeness of the research data against the whole age-1 stock. SBT distribution within the survey area may change by year. For example, although many SBT were caught on the shelf-edge in 2006, 2007 and 2009, few SBT were caught there in recent years (2012-2022). To reflect such annual distribution changes on the abundance index, we are intensively conducting the trolling on the piston-line covered from shore to offshore and developing a grid-type trolling index covering all survey area (Itoh 2014, 2021b, Tsuda and Itoh 2017b, 2018b, 2019b, Itoh and Tsuda 2020b).

Another concern is the residence time of age-1 SBT in the survey area. Although the survey period from January to early February overlaps the residence time of juvenile SBT in the survey area, the peak of migration through the survey area may be varied. The

previous study showed the temporal patterns of residence times of juvenile SBT in the survey area related to these spatial migration pathways in 2004-2007 (Fujioka et al. 2010). The inshore-migrating SBT were left progressively from the survey area in the early month of each summer (Dec-Feb) in 2005/06 and the shelf migrating SBT remained on the shelf over a longer period (Dec-Apr) in 2004/05 and 2006/07. The abundance index may be affected by the proportion of the age-1 SBT population migrating in the survey area. The mechanism for the temporal and spatial movement patterns must be considered related to oceanographic conditions. Electronic tagging would be an effective way to know the movement pattern of age-1 SBT on the environmental condition.

The sub-cohort structure is also of concern. All the years, age-1.0 fish were the primary component. In several years, e.g. 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2016, a significant part of age-1.3 SBT was large that corresponding to age-1, such as 42% in 2011, 55% in 2012, 36% in 2013 and 20.8% in 2016. Only a fraction of age-1.3 fish was observed in 2022. Its effect on the research design or index should be considered.

Such uncertainties on the potential existence of age-1 SBT outside of the survey area and season may harm the representativeness of the trolling indices. However, it would be a little effect if the proportion of the outside fish was negligible or such a proportion was stable over the years. If such a proportion changed largely by year probably due to the fluctuation of oceanic conditions, it may give a large impact on the trolling indices. Although we should be careful about such potential concerns, there is no actual information to support existence of any of the concerns so far.

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Figure 1 The Southern Conquest, used for the 2022 trolling survey.
Photo was taken in 2018.

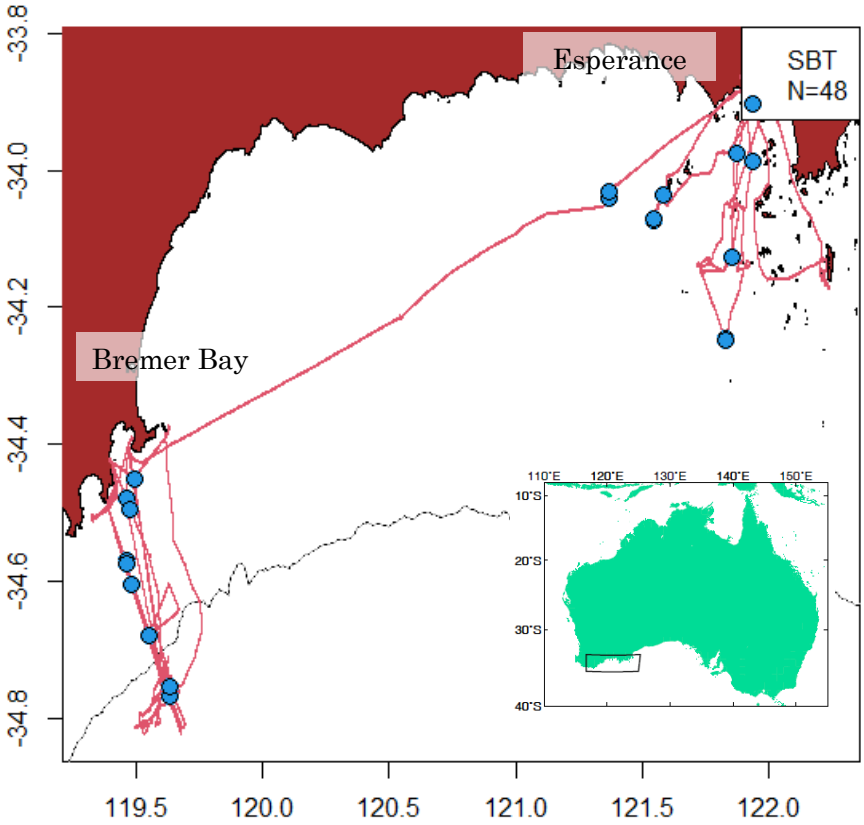

Figure 2 Trajectory of the vessel with location of southern bluefin tuna caught (circle) in the 2022 trolling survey.

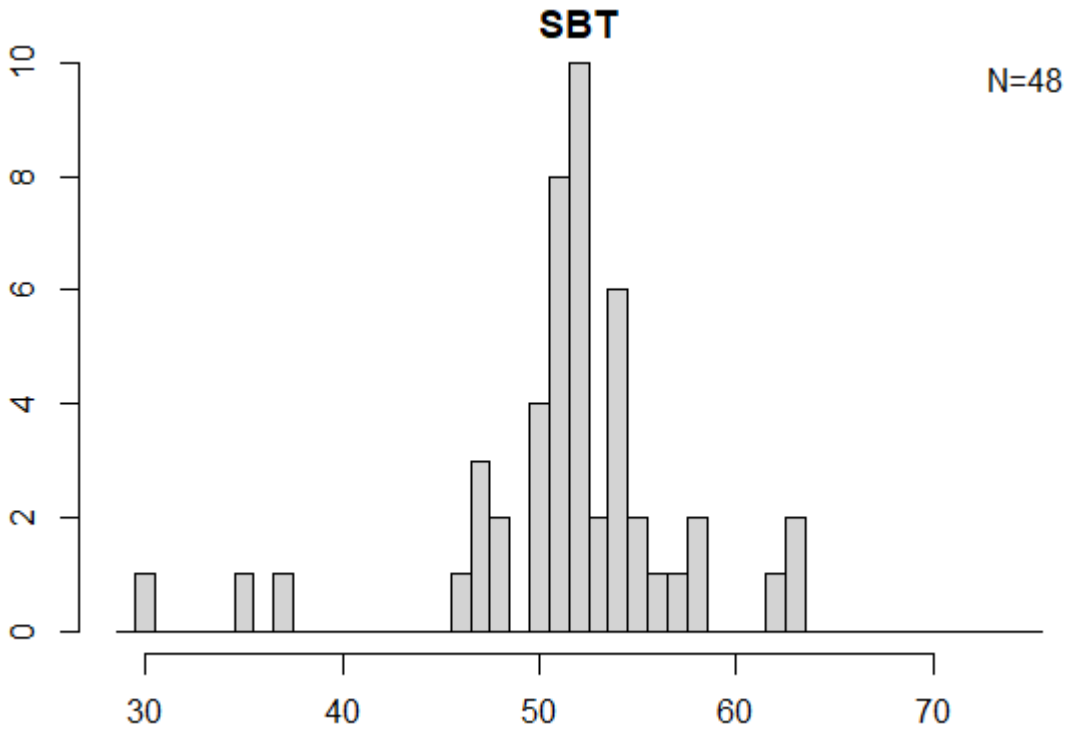

Figure 3 Fork length frequency distribution of southern bluefin tuna caught in the 2022 trolling survey.