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Australia's 2006–07 Southern Bluefin Tuna Fishing Season

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Executive Summary

This report

The 2008 Fishing Season Report summarises catches and fishing activities in the Australian Southern Bluefin Tuna (SBT) Fishery up to and including the 2006–07 quota year (Dec-Nov) and some preliminary results for the 2007–08 season. It also provides a summary of the history of the Australian SBT Fishery and fishing by Japan in the Australian Fishing Zone under bilateral access agreements.

The fishing season

A total of 14 commercial fishing vessels landed SBT in Australian waters in 2006–07 for a total catch of 5234 t. A total of 99.9% of the catch was taken by purse seine with the remainder taken by longline. Eight purse seiners fished during the 2006–07 quota year, but live bait, pontoon-towing and feeding vessels were also involved. Purse seine fishing commenced in early December 2006 and finished in early April 2007.

The 2006–07 quota year catch was 5234 t compared with the previous quota year catch (2005–06) of 5308 t which was above the agreed national allocation to Australia of 5265 t. The catch in excess of the 2005–06 national allocation was deducted from quota holdings in the 2006–07 season. Length frequency data from the purse seine fishery since 2003–04 shows a shift to smaller fish. Australian industry attributes this shift to mixing of two- and three-year-old fish in recent seasons, low prices and weather.

Observers

In the 2007–08 quota year, observers monitored 11.8% of purse seine sets and 12.1% of the estimated SBT catch. In 2007, observers also monitored 22.1% of longline sets in the Eastern Tuna and Billfish Fishery during the months and in the areas of the SBT migration through that fishery. Observers monitored 17.4% of longline sets in the entire Southern and Western Tuna and Billfish Fishery, where only 2 vessels operated in the fishery during this period.

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Introduction

This report summarises catches and fishing activities in the 2006–07 quota year¹ of the Australian Southern Bluefin Tuna (*Thunnus maccoyii*; SBT) Fishery. It also provides preliminary data on the 2007–08 surface fishery and a summary of the history of the Australian SBT Fishery. Caton *et al.* (1995) provides a more detailed historical description of the fishery.

History

Troll catches of SBT were reported as early as the 1920s off the east coast of Australia but significant commercial fishing for SBT commenced in the early 1950s with the establishment of a pole-and-live-bait fishery off New South Wales, South Australia and, later (1970), Western Australia. Purse seine gear overtook pole as the predominant method and catches peaked at 21 500 t in 1982. The bulk of this early Australian catch of SBT was canned. Following quota reductions in 1983–84, the Western Australian pole fishery for very small juveniles closed down and the south-eastern fishery began to target larger juveniles to supply the Japanese sashimi market. Surface catches were further reduced between 1989 and 1995 when about half of the Australian total allowable catch (TAC) was taken by Australia–Japan joint venture longliners in the Australian Fishing Zone (AFZ). The joint venture ceased in late 1995. From 1992 to 1998, domestic longliners operating off Tasmania and New South Wales also took around 5–10% of the total Australian catch.

In 1990–91 about 20 t of SBT tuna were transferred to fattening cages in Port Lincoln, South Australia, to enhance their value. Utilisation of the Australian SBT TAC in ‘farming’ operations increased from 3% of the TAC in 1991–92 to 98% in 1999–00 and it has remained at similar high levels since.

Following declaration of the Australian Fishing Zone (AFZ) in 1979, Japanese longliners fished under a range of bilateral conditions, real time monitoring program and joint-venture arrangements until 1997 when Japanese longliners were excluded from all AFZ fishing operations following failure to reach agreement on global TAC within the CCSBT. Caton and Ward (1996) provide copies of annual subsidiary agreements for the operations of bilateral-licensed longliners in the AFZ from 1979–80 to 1994–95.

Recent Seasons

The Australian domestic SBT catches for the 2006 and 2007 calendar years were 5635 t and 4813 t, respectively. The 2006 calendar year catch is larger than the previously agreed national allocation to Australia of 5265 t because it represents the aggregation of catches from periods in two quota years. The 2005–06 quota year catch was 5308 t and the 2006–07 quota year catch was 5234 t.

¹ Various time periods, such as ‘calendar years’, ‘fishing seasons’ and ‘quota years’, can be used when describing Australia’s SBT fishery. Unless otherwise indicated, we have used quota years in this report, but note that fishing seasons of the various fishery components often span quota years. The start and end dates of Australian quota years have varied and are presented in Appendix 1.

Table 1: Australian Catch by Gear and State for Quota Years 1988–89 to 2006–07

Quota Year	Western Australia			South Australia			New South Wales			Tasmania			Large Longliners			Australia Total			RTMP	Total All Gears		
	Albany Pole	Esperance Pole	Long- line	Total	Pole & Purse Seine	Farm Cages	Long- line	Total	Pole & Purse Seine	Long- line	Total	Troll	Long- line	Total	Aust. Charter	Joint- venture	Total	Domestic Surface			Domestic Long- line	Total Long- line
1988–89	204	221	0	425	4872	0	0	4872	0	1	1	2	0	2	0	684	684	5299	1	685	0	5984
1989–90	133	97	0	230	4199	0	0	4199	0	6	6	14	0	14	0	400	400	4443	6	406	0	4849
1990–91	175	45	0	220	2588	0	0	2588	0	15	15	57	0	57	255	881	1136	2865	15	1151	*300	4316
1991–92	17	0	0	17	1629	138	14	1781	34	90	124	36	20	56	59	2057	2116	1854	124	2240	800	4894
1992–93	0	0	0	0	716	722	68	1506	16	238	254	23	44	67	0	2735	2735	1477	350	3085	650	5212
1993–94	0	0	0	0	621	1294	55	1970	0	286	286	7	105	112	0	2299	2299	1922	446	2745	270	4937
1994–95	0	0	0	0	908	1954	2	2864	0	157	157	4	109	113	0	1295	1295	2866	268	1563	650	5080
1995–96	0	0	0	0	1447	3362	0	4809	28	89	117	0	262	262	0	0	0	4837	351	351	0	5188
1996–97	0	0	0	0	2000	2498	0	4497	7	229	236	2	242	244	0	0	0	4507	472	472	0	4978
1997–98	0	0	^0	0	916	3488	^0	4403	~0	475	475	!0	219	219	0	0	0	4433	664	664	0	5097
1998–99	0	0	^0	0	28	4991	^0	5018	~0	97	97	!0	116	116	0	0	0	5016	216	216	0	5232
1999–00	0	0	^0	0	0	5130	13	5143	0	114	114	0	!0	0	0	0	0	5130	127	127	0	5257
2000–01	0	0	^0	0	0	5162	6	5168	0	32	32	0	!0	0	0	0	0	5162	38	38	0	5247
2001–02	0	0	7	7	0	5234	0	5234	0	*22	*22	0	!0	0	0	0	0	5234	29	29	0	5262
2002–03	0	0	≈0	0	0	5375	0	5375	0	17	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	5375	17	17	0	5391
2003–04	0	0	≈0	0	‡0	4874	†0	4874	0	*226	*226	0	20	0	0	0	0	4874	247	247	0	5120
2004–05	0	0	0	0	0	5214	0	5214	0	35	35	0	0	0	0	0	0	5214	35	35	0	5248
2005–06	0	0	0	0	0	5302	0	5302	0	6	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	5302	6	6	0	5308
2006–07	0	0	0	0	0	5230	0	5230	0	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	5230	4	4	0	5234

Note that a further 700 t of Australian quota was ‘frozen’ (not allocated) in 1990–91.

^ 1997-98 and 1998-99 WA and SA non-farm catches are included in SA pole and purse seine catch, and in 1999–00 and 2000–01 WA longline catch is included in SA longline due to confidentiality guidelines.

~ 1997-98 to 1998-99 NSW pole and purse seine catches are included in NSW longline catch due to confidentiality guidelines.

! 1997-98 and 1998-99 Tas troll catches are included in Tas longline, and in 1999–00, 2000-01 and 2001-02 Tas longline catch is included in NSW longline due to confidentiality guidelines.

* 2001-02 and 2003-04 NSW longline catch also includes QLD longline catch due to confidentiality guidelines.

≈ 2002-03 and 2003-04 WA longline catch is included in NSW longline due to confidentiality guidelines.

† 2003-04 SA longline catch is included in NSW longline due to confidentiality guidelines.

‡ 2003-04 additional SA purse seine catch that did not go into farm cages is included in SA farm cages catch due to confidentiality guidelines.

Catch and Effort

In the 2006–07 quota year, 99.9% of the Australian catch of SBT was taken by purse seine with the remainder taken by longline. Australian catch by gear and State for the quota years 1988–89 to 2006–07 is shown in Table 1. Catch by fishing season with number of vessels and vessel search hours is at Appendix 3. The Australian catch of SBT for the calendar years 2006 and 2007 is mapped in Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively.

Nominal CPUE

Nominal catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) indices for the Australian surface or longline fisheries are not viewed as indicative of stock status. In response to CCSBT Member requests; Australia is in the preliminary stages of attempting to standardize the surface fishery CPUE series. The farm operations use purse seines to catch SBT, with assistance from former pole-and-line vessels as bait boats and spotter planes. This makes developing a reasonable measure of nominal fishing effort difficult and complicates the interpretation of catch rates.

Australian longliners generally target more than one species in the season and the targeted effort (number of hooks targeting SBT) is not distinguishable from logbooks. For information, nominal SBT CPUE for all Australian longline effort is provided at Appendix 4.

No SBT have been landed by troll vessels since 1998–99.

Size composition

In the South Australian surface fishery there has been reduced competition for SBT among fishers following the introduction of individual transferable quotas. Since the late 1980s, the fishery has avoided the very small (<80 cm) SBT, which were previously taken in bulk for canning (Caton *et al.* 1995). This resulted in an increase in the average length of SBT landed for fresh-chilled export. As the farm component of the fishery increased in the 1990s the average length has decreased from a peak of 103.2 cm in 1995 to a low of 97.6 cm in 1999. This is primarily due to selective targeting on schools to catch the best size fish for the farm (Table 2).

Length frequency data from the purse seine fishery for the 2004–05 and 2005–06 seasons showed a marked shift to smaller fish with the average length reducing to 90.7 in the 2005–06 season. Australian industry attributed this shift to a range of factors including mixing of two- and three-year-old fish, low prices prompting fishers to reduce search time to reduce costs, and weather constraints.

The size trends in the Tasmanian fishery reflect the change in orientation of the fishery from trolling to longlining operations since 1993. In the later years, the catch was dominated by longlining operations that tend to target the larger fish.

Since the late 1980s, the average length of SBT landed in NSW has varied considerably because of the varying contribution of longline and sporadic surface catches to the overall catch levels. However, longline caught SBT off NSW have, in general, been considerably larger than SBT previously taken in this fishery.

In recent years it is debatable whether an analysis of average lengths in the longline fishery is meaningful. This is due to the small numbers of fish now caught in the WA, NSW and TAS components of the Australian SBT fishery and changes in fishing operations (Figure 4).

The percentage representation by length in the winter catches of Japanese longliners off eastern Tasmania from 1988 to 1997 showed substantial changes (Figure 5). Initially there were two groups representing a group of pre-adults (<130 cm) and older adult SBT (>150 cm). Progressive increase in representation of younger ages was evident until 1992, and there was also a steady increase in the average length of the SBT comprising the larger mode. The 'trough' between the modes was consistent with intensive removals of small SBT in the early 1980s by Australia's

Figure 1: Australian SBT catch in the 2006 calendar year

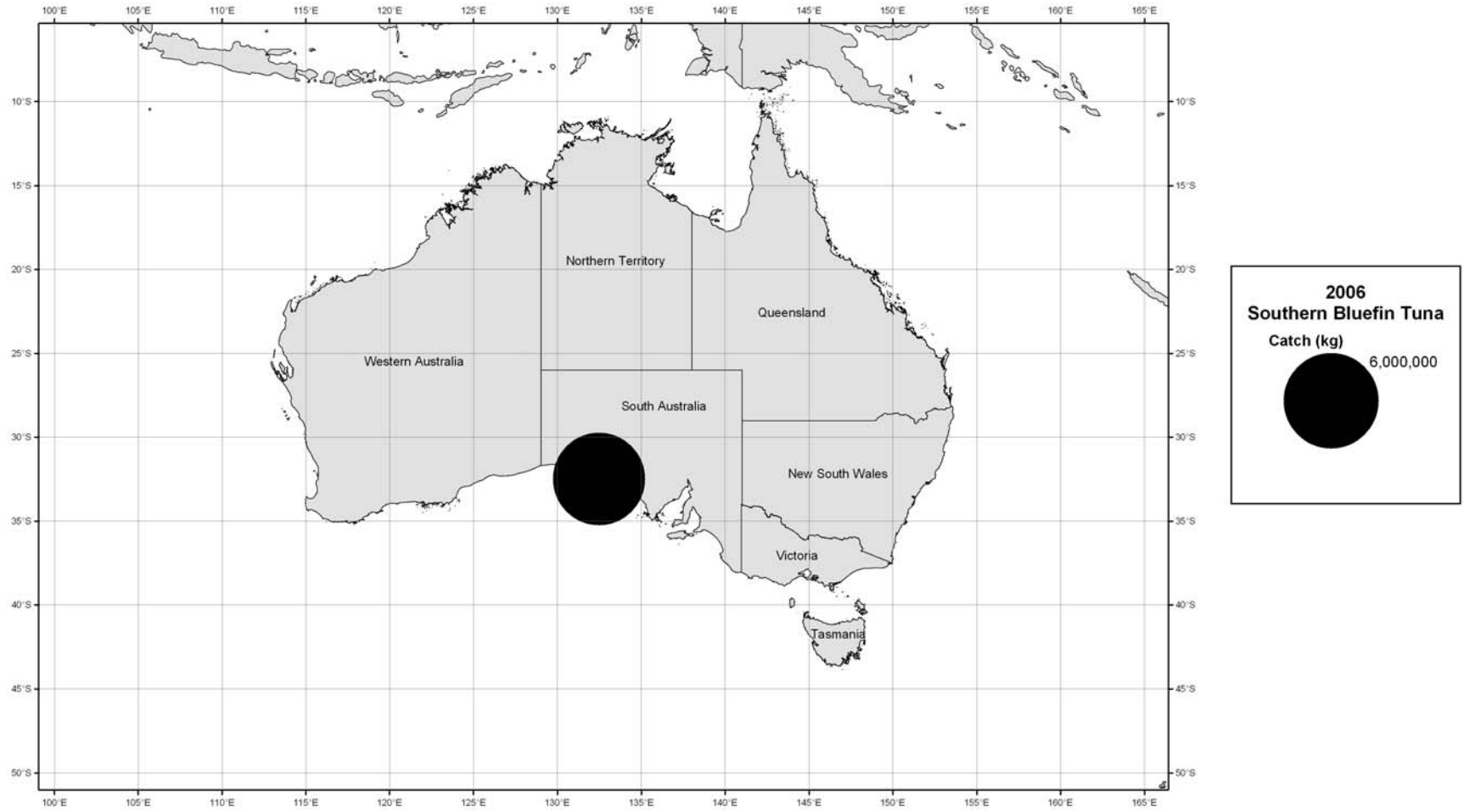
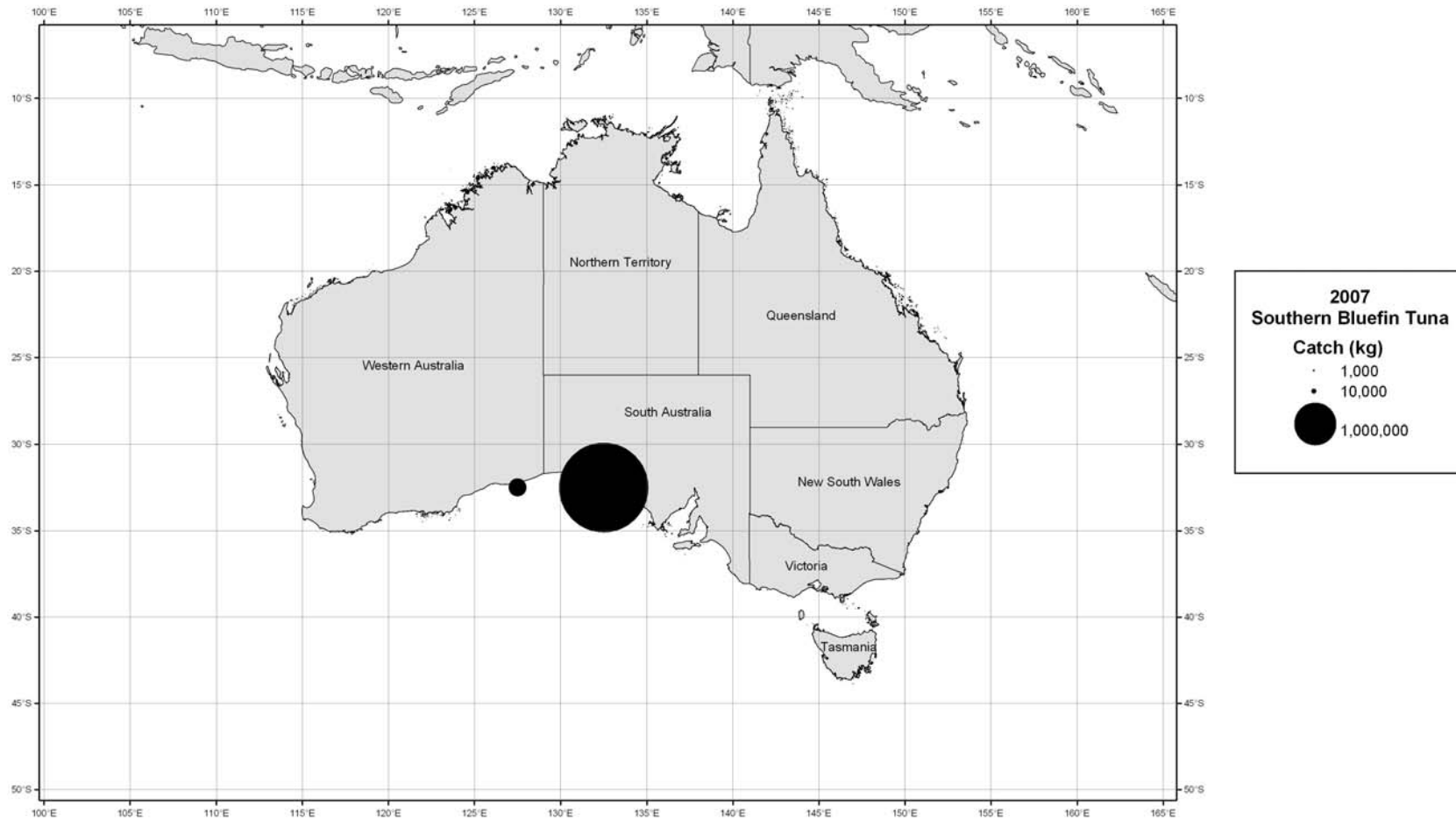


Figure 2: Australian SBT catch in the 2007 calendar year



surface fishery. The increasing representation of small SBT in the eastern Tasmania longline fishery after 1988 had been consistent with the escapement of smaller SBT as a result of the 1988 and 1989 quota reductions in Australia's surface fishery. The reversal of this trend from 1993 was apparent by the reduced presence of SBT <105 cm in 1994, then of SBT <120 cm in 1995, and SBT <135 cm in 1996. This needs careful attention because one explanation could be reduced overall abundance of three-year-old SBT in 1994, three- and four-year-old SBT in 1995 and three-, four- and five-year-old SBT in 1996. The reduced representation of those sizes was also noted in the reduced abundance of small SBT (<100 cm) in the Tasmanian troll fishery in 1994 and 1995, and the failure of the troll fishery (which has depended upon small SBT) in 1996 and 1997.

Table 2: Average fork length (cm) of SBT landed in each Australian state, 1989 to 2007.

Calendar Year	*Western Australia	*South Australia	Tasmania	NSW	Joint-Venture
1989	65.4	88.8	–	–	–
1990	65.6	89.3	96.0	112.8	–
1991	67.2	95.5	94.9	154.8	114.5
1992	66.1	97.0	93.4	109.2	108.0
1993	65.2	101.1	99.7	117.8	116.5
1994	–	97.4	125.5	121.3	124.8
1995	–	103.2	127.9	125.0	125.0
1996	–	102.7	132.7	139.7	–
1997	–	97.7	133.2	134.6	–
1998	–	94.9	134.5	136.1	–
1999	–	97.6	134.2	138.5	–
2000	–	97.0	–	154.3	–
2001	154.3	98.1	–	149.7	–
2002	–	98.4	–	159.9	–
2003	–	98.7	–	154.1	–
2004	–	93.6	–	161.9	–
2005	–	91.0	–	161.7	–
2006	–	90.7	–	154.1	–
2007	–	94.0	–	150.5	–

* Lengths are reported by calendar year, except for Western Australia and South Australia, which are by financial year (e.g. 1998 represents the financial year 1998–99) to cover the summer season

In 1997, the troll fishery results were poor and the observer data from Japanese longliners for the Tasmanian winter season showed a scarcity of SBT less than 105 cm. However, the 1997 data showed an increased representation of 105 cm SBT than in 1996. In the absence of Japanese and joint-venture longline operations in the AFZ in 1998, no subsequent comparison is possible.

While the successive reduction in small SBT did not persist in 1997, the previous decreases may signal several weak year classes in the early 1990s. The changed representation of 105 cm SBT does not appear to have been associated with any change in fishing or reporting practices. Since about 1994, the Japan Tuna Federation reportedly instructed all Japanese longliners to return SBT less than 25 kg to the sea, to protect small SBT.

Figure 3: Length frequency of SBT purse seine catch in Australian waters raised to total catch, 2000–01 to 2007–08 quota years

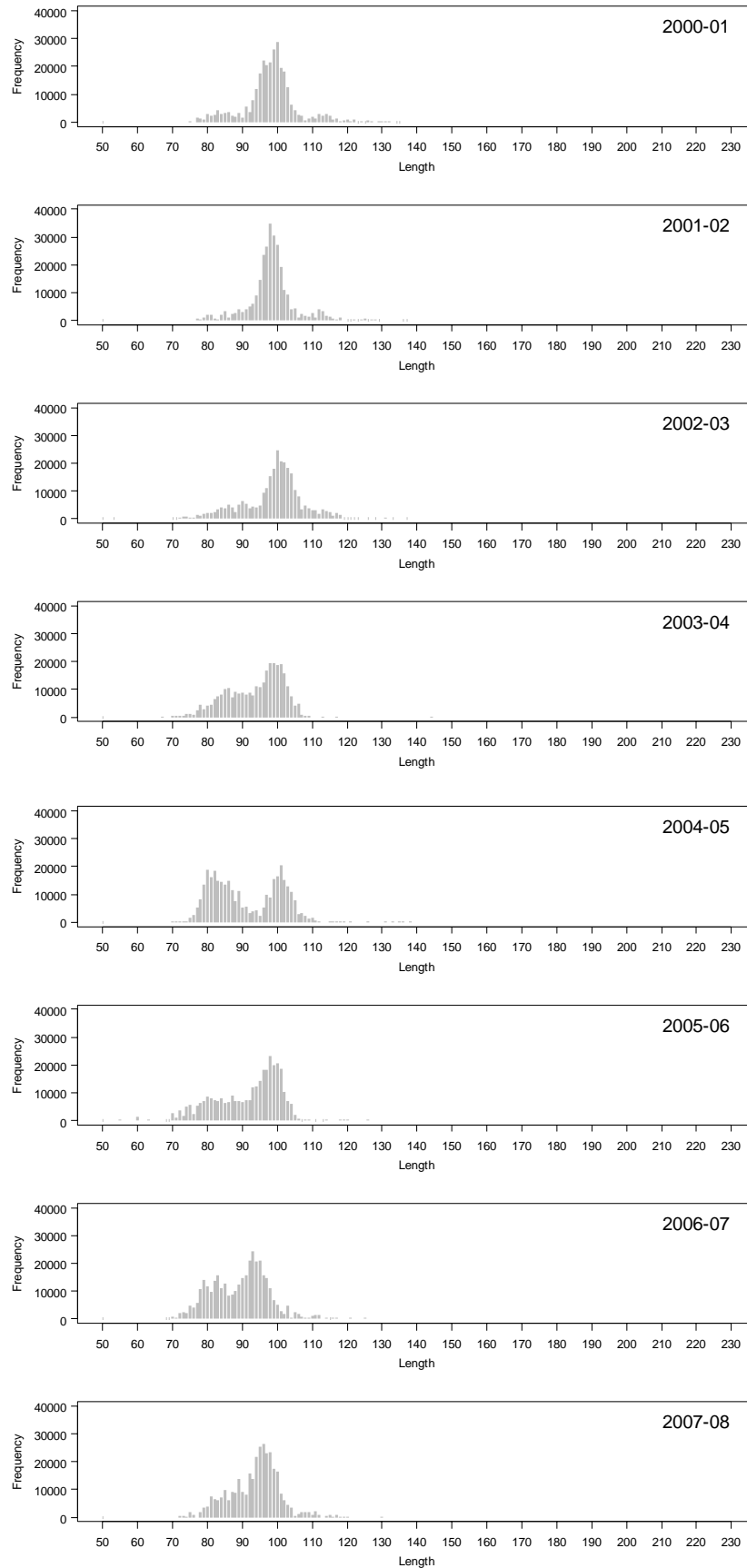


Figure 4: Length frequency histograms for retained SBT longline catch in Australian waters raised to total catch, 1999–00 to 2006–07 quota years

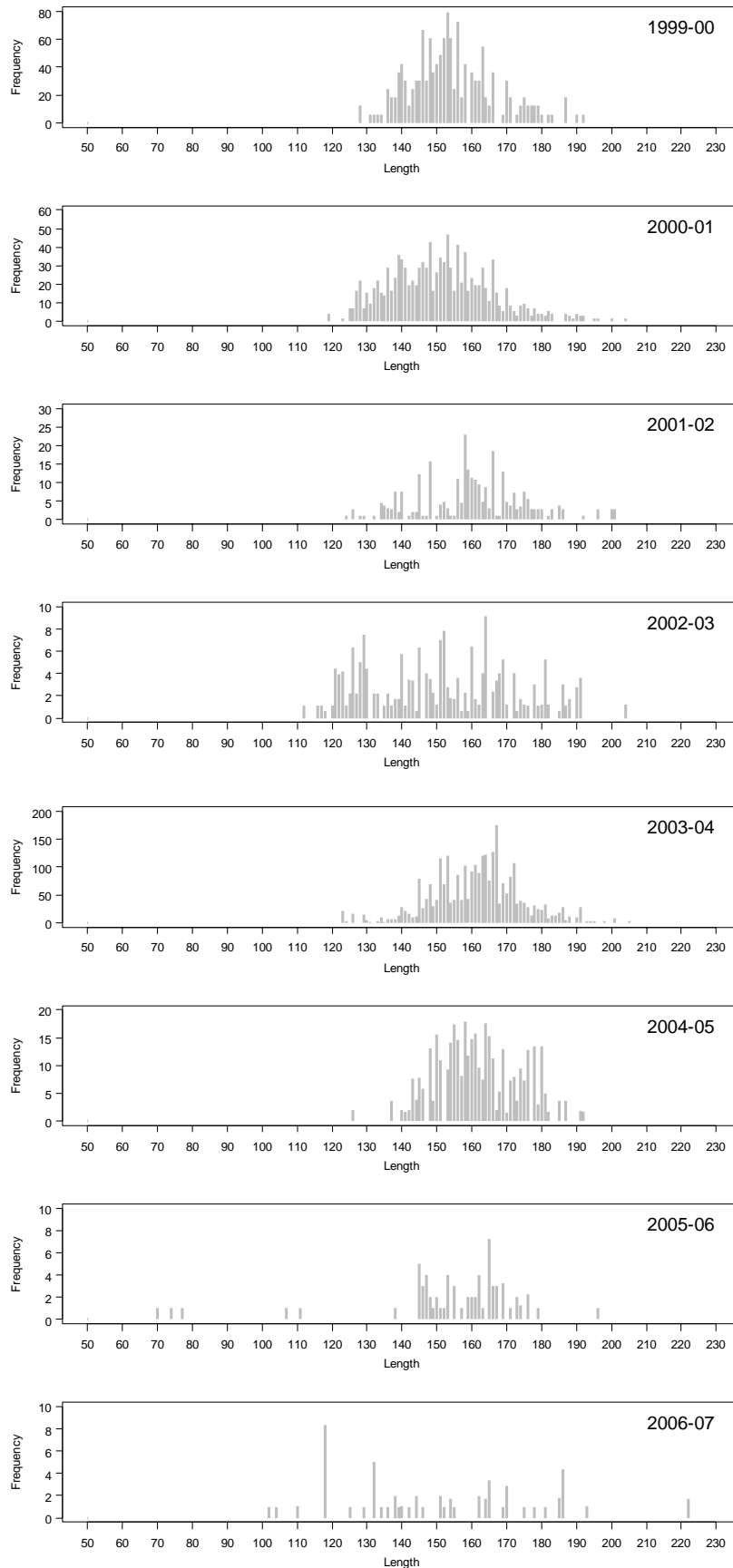
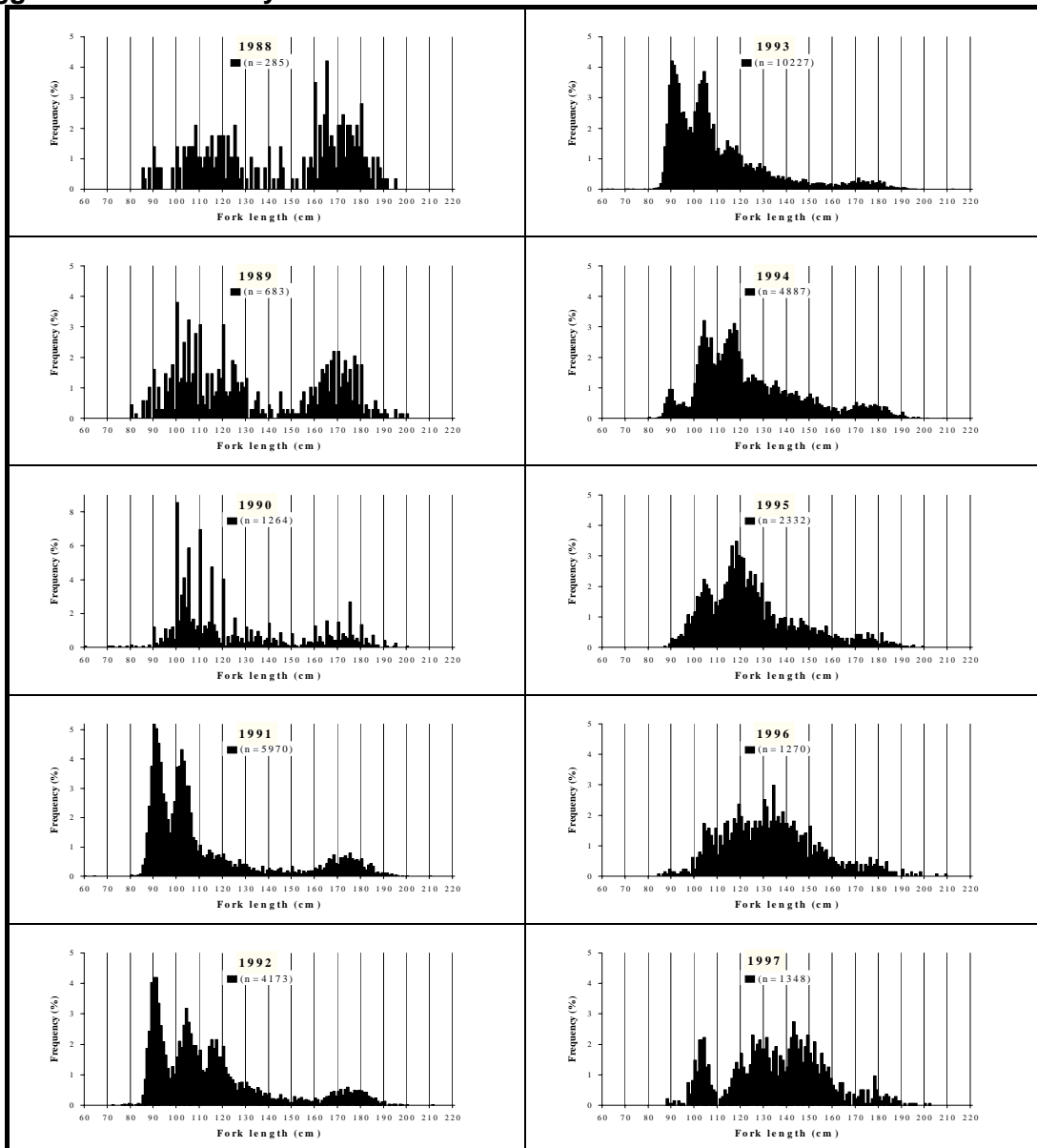


Figure 5: Length frequency of SBT measured by Australian observers on Japanese longliners fishing in the Tasmania region, 1988 to 1997. The data include small SBT tagged and released by observers.



Fleet size and distribution

In the 2006–07 quota year, a total of 14 commercial fishing vessels landed SBT in Australian waters.

South Australia

The one- to five-year-old SBT, which school from late spring to autumn in surface waters of the eastern Great Australian Bight, South Australia, were fished by six purse seiners during the 2006–07 quota year, but various live bait, pontoon-towing and feeding vessels were also involved. Fishing commenced in early December 2006 and finished in early April 2007 for the season.

Western Australia

There was no SBT caught off Western Australia in the 2006–07 quota year.

New South Wales

During the 2006–07 quota year, eight domestic longliners reported landing SBT from the area of the fishery for older juveniles and adults in deeper waters off NSW.

Tasmania

There was no SBT caught off Tasmania in the 2006–07 quota year.

Queensland

There was no SBT caught off Queensland in the 2006–07 quota year.

Other relevant information

Recreational catch

The number of SBT tag releases by Australian recreational fishers is provided in Table 3. These data do not include recreational tag releases using CCSBT tags.

Table 3: Tag releases by Australian recreational fishers, 1990 to 2005 (Source: NSW Fisheries).

Year	Percentage of total releases					No. of Releases
	Tas	NSW	SA	Vic	WA	
1990	7.1	0.0	14.3	57.1	21.4	14
1991	5.8	44.7	23.2	25.6	0.7	293
1992	5.6	18.5	48.1	24.1	3.7	54
1993	3.5	6.9	87.9	0.0	1.7	231
1994	0.0	14.3	76.2	0.0	9.5	63
1995	0.0	25.0	25.0	0.0	50.0	12
1996	0.0	25.8	74.2	0.0	0.0	159
1997	0.0	3.7	87.0	0.0	9.3	54
1998	4.8	0.8	52.5	40.6	1.3	377
1999	0.0	0.0	70.9	29.1	0.0	117
2000	0.0	0.4	99.1	0.4	0.0	224
2001	38.8	1.9	23.8	30.6	5.0	160
2002	39.4	2.6	25.9	25.4	6.7	193
2003	14.3	0.0	71.4	0.0	14.3	21
2004	31.8	0.0	45.5	0.0	22.7	22
2005	0.0	2.1	93.7	0.0	4.2	96
2006	7.2	0.2	84.7	0	7.9	584
2007	29.3	0.1	66.2	1.3	3.1	1303

Overall the data available on recreational catch of SBT is poor but an initial review revealed high year-to-year variability in catches and locations in which SBT were taken. For the past ten years, indicative estimates of annual recreational catches ranged between 3 and 85 t with the highest catches occurring around Tasmania (Table 4). These data are indicative estimates only and are based on a range of different data sources.

While there are insufficient data at present to quantify the total recreational catches of SBT for recent seasons, anecdotal reports suggest that there was a good season in the 2007–08 quota year around south-eastern Tasmania, in Victoria and South Australia.

Table 4: Indicative estimates of recreational catch (t) by Australian recreational fishers, 1994 to 2007.

Year	Recreational Catch (t)
1994	16
1995	insufficient data
1996	insufficient data
1997	insufficient data
1998	38
1999	3
2000	10
2001	60
2002	85
2003	insufficient data
2004	insufficient data
2005	insufficient data
2006	insufficient data
2007	insufficient data

Discards in the Commercial Fishery

During the 2006–07 quota year, no discarding of SBT was observed or reported in logbooks collected in the purse seine fishery in the Great Australian Bight.

In 2004, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) observers monitored longline operations in the Eastern Tuna and Billfish Fishery (ETBF) during the months and areas in which SBT were most likely to be taken incidentally (i.e. south of 30 °S from May to September). Observer data showed that 61% of longline caught SBT were discarded during the observed operations. In contrast, the level of SBT discards recorded in logbooks from other vessels fishing during the same period south of 30 °S was only 10%. In response to this new information AFMA implemented tighter access controls, as well as 100% observer coverage for the 2005–06, 2006–07 and 2007–08 quota years in areas and at times where there is a high risk of SBT being caught.

In 2007, in the ETBF, south of 30 °S and during the months of May to September, 20 observers monitored 123,000 hooks of a season total of 559,000, representing 22.1% observer coverage of longline effort during the SBT migration. The total catch number of SBT caught while observers were on board was 94 of which 40 were retained, 54 were discarded (all of which were released alive) and none were tagged. Individual retained fish ranged from 102-222 cm in length. The size distribution of the discarded ETBF longline catch of SBT from 2002 to 2006 is shown in Figure 1 of Attachment 1. ETBF logbooks for 2007 showed 3.5 t (45 fish) of SBT were retained in the ETBF fishery and 26 (36.6%) were discarded. Further details on discarding are provided in Attachment 1.

During 2007, BRS observers monitored 17.4% of longline operations in the Southern and Western Tuna and Billfish Fishery. There were no SBT observed caught in the fishery in the 2006–07 quota year.

Fish release trials

In response to the operational characteristics of the SBT fishery, AFMA and the fishing industry agreed to undertake a two-year trial commencing in the 2007–08 quota year to investigate a mechanism to allow a single release of live fish to avoid exceeding Australia's national allocation of SBT. The first release of the trial was conducted on 6 April 2008.

Approximately 2000 SBT (approximately 39 t) were released at 35°14.5' S/135°36.5' E. To select the release site, an aerial survey of three preferred release locations was conducted on 4 April 2008. These sites were selected because they are known as locations where wild SBT can be found. The

final release site was selected because it had a strong presence of wild SBT indicating that the area was suitable habitat for SBT.

The infrastructure to undertake the release and aerial spotting was provided by industry and observed by two government officials. No mortalities were recorded during the tow and release of fish.

Based on the good outcomes in 2008 Australia intends to continue the trial release of fish if there are circumstances which may result in Australia exceeding its national allocation.

Appendix 1: SBT fishing season dates 1988–89 to 2007–08

Quota Year	Start Date	End Date
1988–89	1 October 1988	30 September 1989
1989–90	1 October 1989	30 September 1990
1990–91	1 October 1990	30 September 1991
1991–92	1 October 1991	31 October 1992
1992–93	1 November 1992	31 October 1993
1993–94	1 November 1993	31 October 1994
1994–95	1 November 1994	15 December 1995
1995–96	16 December 1995	15 December 1996
1996–97	16 December 1996	30 November 1997
1997–98	1 December 1997	30 November 1998
1998–99	1 December 1998	30 November 1999
1999–00	1 December 1999	30 November 2000
2000–01	1 December 2000	30 November 2001
2001–02	1 December 2001	30 November 2002
2002–03	1 December 2002	30 November 2003
2003–04	1 December 2003	30 November 2004
2004–05	1 December 2004	30 November 2005
2005–06	1 December 2005	30 November 2006
2006–07	1 December 2006	30 November 2007
2007–08	1 December 2007	30 November 2008

Appendix 2: Purse seine fishing duration

Quota Year	First Day of Season	Last Day of Season	1st Day	50%	75%	90%	Last Day	Duration
1993-94	1-Nov-93	31-Oct-94	49	113	127	138	175	127
1994-95	1-Nov-94	15-Dec-95	36	106	133	160	* 410	* 375
1995-96	16-Dec-95	15-Dec-96	1	67	87	131	365	365
1996-97	16-Dec-96	30-Nov-97	2	66	85	95	141	140
1997-98	1-Dec-97	30-Nov-98	19	67	84	98	364	346
1998-99	1-Dec-98	30-Nov-99	10	52	73	78	113	104
1999-00	1-Dec-99	30-Nov-00	4	56	65	79	118	115
2000-01	1-Dec-00	30-Nov-01	4	60	80	88	97	94
2001-02	1-Dec-01	30-Nov-02	9	61	75	80	121	113
2002-03	1-Dec-02	30-Nov-03	11	60	82	97	116	106
2003-04	1-Dec-03	30-Nov-04	9	66	87	102	115	107
2004-05	1-Dec-04	30-Nov-05	5	61	83	98	119	115
2005-06	1-Dec-05	30-Nov-06	18	70	92	99	358	341
2006-07	1-Dec-06	30-Nov-07	1	74	93	104	125	125
2007-08	1-Dec-07	30-Nov-08	10	58	91	94	99	90

'1st Day' = Day of First Capture, '50%' etc denote the day of the season on which that percentage of the catch had been taken, 'Last Day' = the Day of Last Capture. Note that the 2007-08 figures provided are preliminary as the fishing season does not finish until November 2008.

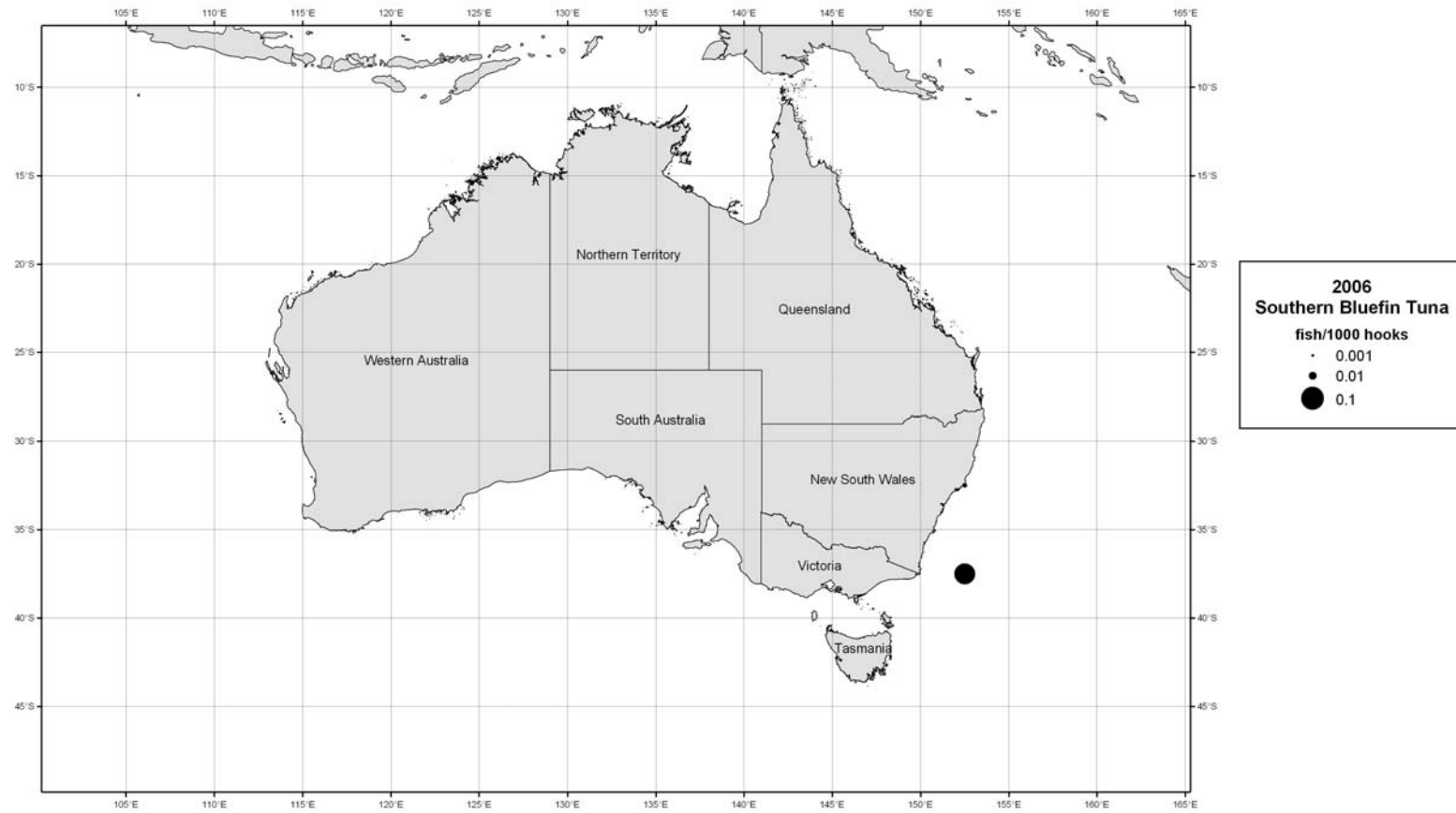
* These figures are greater than the expected 365 days in a year because the season dates changed for this season and extended it for longer than one year.

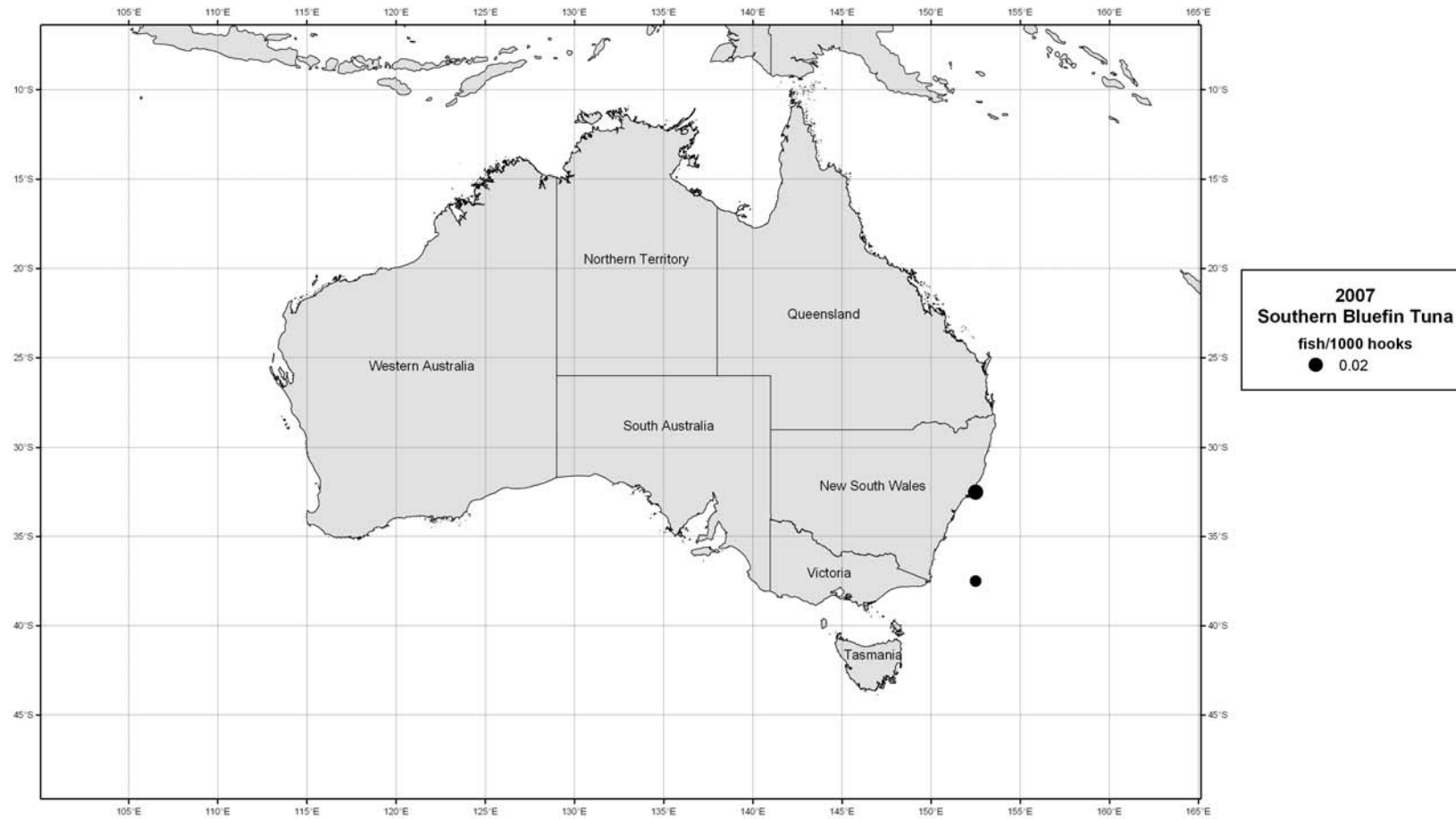
Appendix 3: Australian surface catch by season 1994-95 to 2007-08

Season	Estimated Catch (t)	Actual Catch (t)	Boats	Vessel search hrs	Sets	1 ^o sqs fished
1994-95	2179	2009	5	526	104	5
1995-96	2859	3442	6	631	89	11
1996-97	3134	2505	7	769	118	13
1997-98	3916	3629	7	671	143	8
1998-99	4418	4991	7	972	129	3
1999-00	4746	5131	8	764	107	5
2000-01	5100	5162	8	799	129	2
2001-02	5400	5234	7	1309	159	3
2002-03	5188	5375	7	1276	150	5
2003-04	5299	4874	6	1202	160	4
2004-05	5225	5215	8	1168	139	4
2005-06	5463	5302	7	1304	156	6
2006-07	5091	5230	6	1459	160	8
2007-08	4530	5211	7	1217	134	2

Note that the 2007-08 figures provide are preliminary as the season does not finish until end November 2008.

Appendix 4: Nominal CPUE for all Australian longliners in the 2006 and 2007 calendar years





Attachment 1: An Overview of the Australian Southern Bluefin Tuna Observer Program

Observer Sources and Training

The Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) has recruited and trained observers since its establishment in 1992. Approximately 30 observers are currently employed in the AFMA observer program. They are sourced from universities and the maritime industries from around Australia and require the ability to live and work at sea, have demonstrated experience in collecting biological data at sea, and have experience in fisheries research methodologies and collection of associated scientific data. Observers also hold marine radio operators certificate of proficiency (or similar qualifications and/or experience), a sea safety certificate and medical certificate, and have completed an AFMA observer training course.

In 2008, in addition to the independent AFMA observers, an international observer from South Africa (Capricorn Fisheries Monitoring) was deployed for one trip. This was a different observer than was used in 2006 and 2007, and follows on from the engagement of an American observer in 2005. Successful observations and data collection were achieved by both AFMA and international observers.

Summary

Purse Seine Fishery – Great Australian Bight 2007–08

The purse seine observer program for the 2007–08 Australian SBT fishing season monitored fishing and tow operations between 33–34 °S and 131–133 °E in December, January, February and March 2008. One Australian and one South African observer monitored 16 purse seine sets where fish were retained and one set that was aborted and fish were released. This represents 11.8% of the total sets in which fish were taken in 2007–08. From these observations an estimated 546 tonnes of SBT were caught during observed sets representing 12.1% of the estimated tonnage caught for the 2007–08 season.

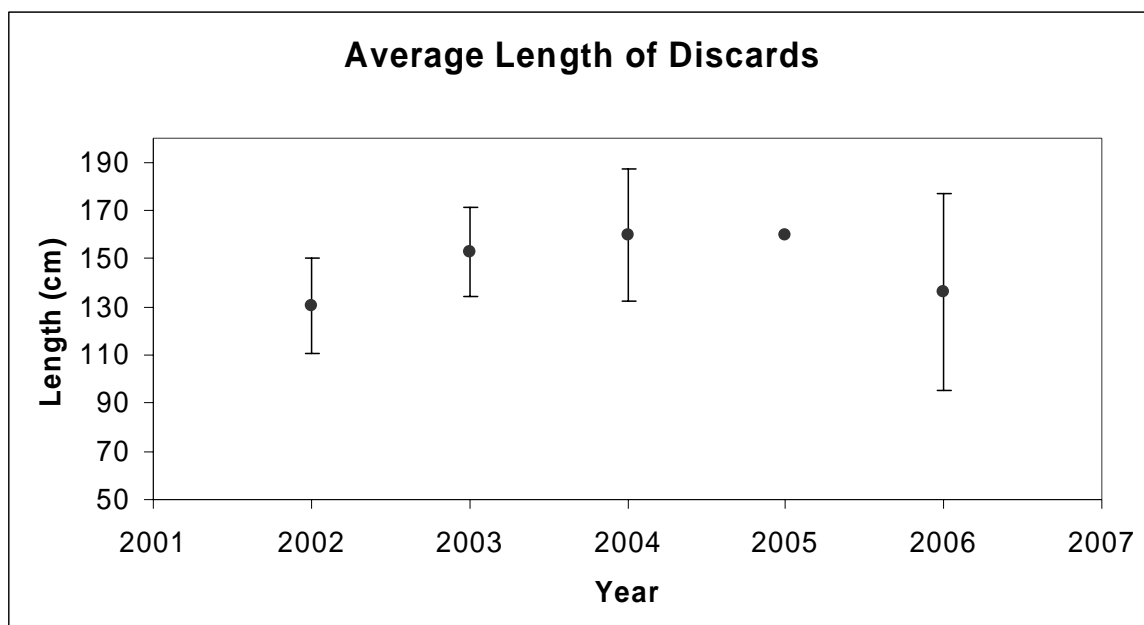
Observers also monitored and recorded SBT mortalities on two towing operations.

Longline Fishery

In 2007, in the Eastern Tuna and Billfish Fishery (ETBF), south of 30 °S and during the months of May to September (the months in which SBT are usually caught), 20 observers monitored 123,000 hooks of a season total of 559,000, representing 22.1% observer coverage of longline effort. The total catch number of SBT caught while observers were on board was 94 of which 40 were retained, 54 were discarded (all of which were released alive) and none were tagged. Individual retained fish ranged from 102–222 cm in length. The size distribution of the discarded ETBF longline catch of SBT from 2002 to 2006 is shown in Figure 1. ETBF logbooks for 2007 showed 3.5 t (45 fish) of SBT were retained in the ETBF fishery and 26 (36.6%) were discarded.

In 2007, in the Southern and Western Tuna and Billfish Fishery 17.4% of operations were observed. There were no SBT observed caught in the fishery in 2007.

Figure 1: Average length of observed discards by year for 2002 to 2006 in the Eastern Tuna and Billfish Fishery (n=30 for 2002, n=13 for 2003, n=28 for 2004, n=1 for 2005 and n=15 for 2006, total not recorded=480).



Scientific Observer Program Design and Coverage

The target coverage for the SBT purse-seine fleet operating out of Port Lincoln is 10% of the total catch and effort for the fishery and 100% of all operations while an observer is on board. Most of the Australian SBT purse seine effort has historically taken place in an area between 33-35 °S and between 131-133 °E.

Observers in the purse seine fishery in the 2007–08 quota year spent 98 days at sea and observed purse seiner activities for 46 days and tow activities for 52 days.

Typically, less than 7% of total effort in the purse seine sector of the Australian SBT fishery occurs in December and hence AFMA decided not to conduct observations in that month on the basis that such coverage is not cost-effective or representative of the period when most of the catch occurs. However a tow operation was observed in December 2007.

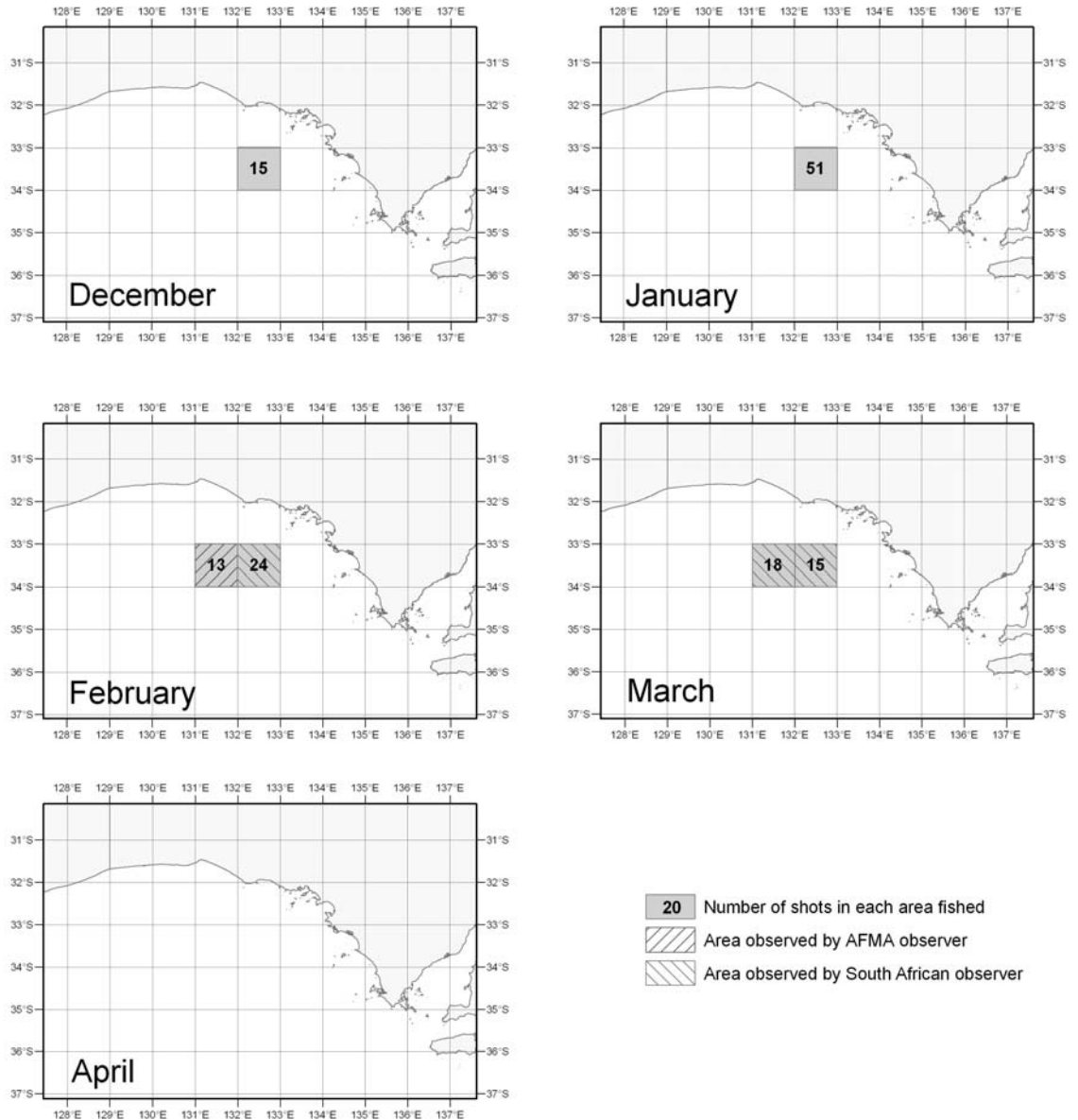
Observer Data

Effort Data

In 2008, observers monitored 16 purse seine sets where fish were retained and one set that was aborted and fish were released because they were too small. Fishing operations observed in the purse seine sector were based in the Great Australian Bight area between 33°03'–33°47'S and 131°12' and 132°26'E (see Figure 2). The observed sets were 11.8% of all sets in the fishery for the 2007–08 quota year.

Data were gathered on vessel characteristics, fishing gear and equipment. Comprehensive operational and environmental information were recorded for each set that occurred while the observer was on board. This included information on searching, chumming, setting and hauling activities. Information on chumming operations by the fishing vessel and associated chumming vessels was also recorded. In addition, observers recorded information on the movement of some spotter aircraft and their time in the area preceding sets.

Figure 2: The number of sets recorded in the SBT purse-seine fishery from December 2007 to March 2008. The hatching represents areas where observations took place.



Two tows were observed and quantitative data were collected on the number of SBT mortalities, the date they occurred and whether they were retained or discarded. Data were also collected on:

- Towing methods
- Average towing speed
- Cage number and diameter
- Maximum cage depth
- Average weight of SBT transferred
- Estimated number of SBT
- Methods of counting and verifying fish counts

Catch Data

Observers recorded catch composition and fate of target and bycatch species where possible during all observed sets. The time at start and end of observation, the observed catch in estimated number and estimated weight for SBT and all other species were recorded where possible.

As fish are taken alive for farming purposes in the purse-seine sector, it is not possible to obtain actual weight or length information at the time of catching the SBT. Consequently, both catch data and observed catch data are estimates only and these are reported below.

In total, observers estimated 546 tonnes of SBT were caught during observed sets. This observed catch accounted for 12.1% of the total estimated catch of 4530 t. The actual tonnage caught by purse-seine vessels in 2007–08 was 5211 t.

Observers monitored and made records of bycatch species where possible during all sets. Bycatch data were collected from visual observation of the catch before transfer to tow cages and through observation of any species meshed during hauling of the purse seine net.

Length Frequency data

It is not possible for onboard observers to obtain length measurements for the live SBT catch, but observers are required to take biological samples from all SBT mortalities. During purse seine operations, the observers recorded 10 SBT mortalities of which 4 were sampled (LCF for these fish were 104 to 129 cm). During towing operations, the observer recorded 21 SBT mortalities of which 16 were sampled (LCF for these fish were 62 to 135 cm).

Hobsbawn *et al.* (2008) conducted a length frequency analysis from measurements taken from the farmed SBT. This analysis is more robust and more likely to be representative of the entire SBT catch.

Biological data

Otoliths were obtained from all sampled mortalities in the purse seine operations and tow operations. There is also an ongoing project to collect otoliths from farm mortalities.

Weight samples were obtained for all SBT mortalities observed. The average weight for the 4 mortalities sampled by the observers during purse seine operations was 30.0 kg. The average weight for the 16 mortalities observed during towing operations was 23.8 kg.

Tag Return Monitoring

There were no tagged SBT reported by the observers.

Conclusions

Sixteen purse seine sets, representing 11.8% of the total sets in which fish were taken during 2007–08 were observed. Six percent of tows and 12.1% of the estimated tonnage was also observed. Reports, observations and data collected by the Australian and overseas observers did not reveal significant differences between the activities or results of the two. Observer coverage of longline effort in the ETBF was 22.1% and 17.4% of hooks set in the SWTBF were observed.

References

Hobsbawn P.I., Phillips, K. and Begg, G. 2008. Australia's 2004–05 Southern Bluefin Tuna Fishing Season. Working Paper CCSBT-SC/0809/SBT Fisheries, thirteenth meeting of the Scientific Committee of the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna, Rotorua, September 2008.