

**REVIEW OF THE CATCH AND CATCH-AT-AGE ESTIMATION FOR THE E-BFT
CATCH INFLATED ESTIMATES 1998 - 2007**

Ortiz M., Kimoto A., Laretta M., Palma C., Rouyer T., Gordo A., Di Natale A., Rodriguez-Marin E., and
Walter J.

SUMMARY

During the 2022 Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Bluefin Tuna Data Preparatory Meeting, the Bluefin Species Group (BFTSG) agreed to revise the assumptions and update the catch-at-size/catch-at-age (CAS/CAA) intersessionally by replacing the "NEI (inflated)" partial catches component (1998-2007) with a new set of combined Mediterranean size samples. An ad-hoc small group was formed to carry out this task and proposed an alternative CAS/CAA for the 2022 E-BFT stock assessment, this document summarizes these analyses. This document provides the revised CAS (version 2b), and two CAA based on the von Bertalanffy and the Richards growth curves. The small group agreed that this revised CAS is a better estimate of the size distribution for the NEI-inflated catch and proposed to be adopted by the BFTSG, and also recommended that this revision would be applied only to VPA (Virtual Population Analysis) and possibly ASAP (Age Structured Assessment Program).

KEYWORDS

Atlantic bluefin tuna, Catch at size, Catch at age, inflated catch

Introduction

The ICCAT Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Bluefin tuna (E-BFT) stock assessments since 2010 have included historical the estimated non-reported IUU (Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated) catches covering the period 1982-2007. The SCRS agreed to include them in the ICCAT database Task 1 as four NEI (not elsewhere included) flags (NEI (ETRO), NEI (Flag related), NEI (combined), NEI (inflated)). The flag “NEI (inflated)” represents the largest portion of NEI estimated catches reaching 30 to 40% of the total E-BFT catches between 2000 and 2007, and the assumptions of the size distribution of this IUU catch to produce the Catch-at-Size (CAS) and the Catch-at-Age (CAA) for a large amount of the total catch has been an important source of uncertainty of the stock assessment. During the 2022 Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Bluefin Tuna Data Preparatory Meeting (Anon., 2022, section 4.3.3), the Bluefin Species Group (BFTSG) agreed to revise the assumptions and update the CAS/CAA intersessionally by replacing the "NEI (inflated)" partial catches component (1998-2007) with a new set of combined Mediterranean size samples (various gears and Flags). An *ad-hoc* small group was formed to carry out this task and proposed an alternative CAS/CAA for the 2022 E-BFT stock assessment, this document summarizes these analyses.

In 2012 the SCRS and the BFTSG provided estimates of IUU catches of eastern bluefin tuna for the Mediterranean Fisheries for the period 1998 – 2007 that were adopted by the SCRS and included in the E-BFT catch series as NEI-inflated. The BFTSG agreed to assign these IUU catches to the main gear-fleet operating during these years, the PS-MED fleet. Based on this decision, the NEI-inflated catch was converted to CAS and CAA assuming the same size distribution of the PS-MED fleet. However, in reviewing the destination of the E-BFT IUU catches, auxiliary information indicated that most of this catch was destined for export to international markets, and were preferentially medium and large size fish that reached better prices. Hence, using only the PS-MED size distribution of small/juvenile fish was considered inconsistent. Thus, the size distributions of the IUU catches were reviewed and alternative estimates of CAS/CAA are produced for the evaluation models to better integrated this important component of the catch series.

Materials and Methods

The proposed methodology is based on the assumption that all the active bluefin tuna fisheries during this period have unreported catches, with larger proportion of those fisheries that could target medium and large bluefin tuna. Following this assumption, it was used all the size sampling available during this period for all fisheries that reported officially Task 1 NC (Task 1 nominal catches). The unreported catch NEI was allocated among main gears and quarters using the proportions of reported catch by gear/year/quarter (CATDIS) and given higher percent allocation to the gears with catches of medium and large fish including longline, traps, and hand lines. In the case of the purse seine (PS) fisheries, it was only used the size distribution of quarter 2 (Apr-Jun). This period coincided with the transition of the PS fisheries toward medium and larger fish particularly during the spawning period, fish that were primarily taken for the farming operations. It was also noted that since 2015 when the initial CAS was produced for the IUU component, the overall size-frequency samples and distributions of the PS Mediterranean fleets have been thoroughly reviewed and updated mainly for the EU-France and EU-Spanish fleets (Ref to Tristan, Gordo paper).

The small group provided the revised CAS (version 2b), and two CAA based on the von Bertalanffy and the Richards growth curves.

Results and discussions

The revised CAS and consequently updated CAA with the von Bertalanffy growth curve indicated a lower proportion of ages 2, and 3 in the NEI-"inflated catch" and increased the proportion of ages 4, 5, and older compared to the previous version (**Figures 1 and 2**). It was also estimated catches of smaller fish of age 1. However, in general the CAA composition indicates that about 50% of the total catches were of ages 1 to 4. Only after 2009, was observed the full shift in the fisheries towards medium and larger fish when about 70% of the catch is of ages 5 and older.

The catch-at-age estimates from cohort slicing associated with changing the growth curve model from von Bertalanffy (**Table 1**) to the Richards model (**Table 2**) are shown in **Figure 3**. The main difference in estimated numbers was observed for age classes 1 to 6 and 12 to 15. The Richards model estimated fewer catches of fish ages 12 to 15 compared to the von Bertalanffy, but similar estimates of fish 16 and older. In general, the von Bertalanffy model was shown to be more accurate for younger age classes but overestimated the size-at-age of older fish (Ailloud et al. 2017). It is recommended to use the Richards growth estimates for VPA runs that assume a plus-group at age 16, but to use the von Bertalanffy estimates for runs with a plus-group at age 10.

The small group agreed that this revised CAS is a better estimate of the size distribution for the NEI-inflated catch and proposed to be adopted by the BFTSG. The small group recommended that this revision would be applied only to estimate CAS and CAA (VPA and possibly ASAP).

The small group also considered the size distribution and CAS for the reported Task 1 NC, during this period, highlighting that PS accounts for 80-90% of the reported catch. In view of the size distribution review carried out on the NEI catch, the need to review the CAS for the reported catch from PS fleet is evident, since the size distributions may not include the medium and larger size fish. However, further review of size distribution of the PS reported catch will require a more in depth analyses and evaluation and will be investigated by the BFTSG for future assessments and MSE reconditioning.

References

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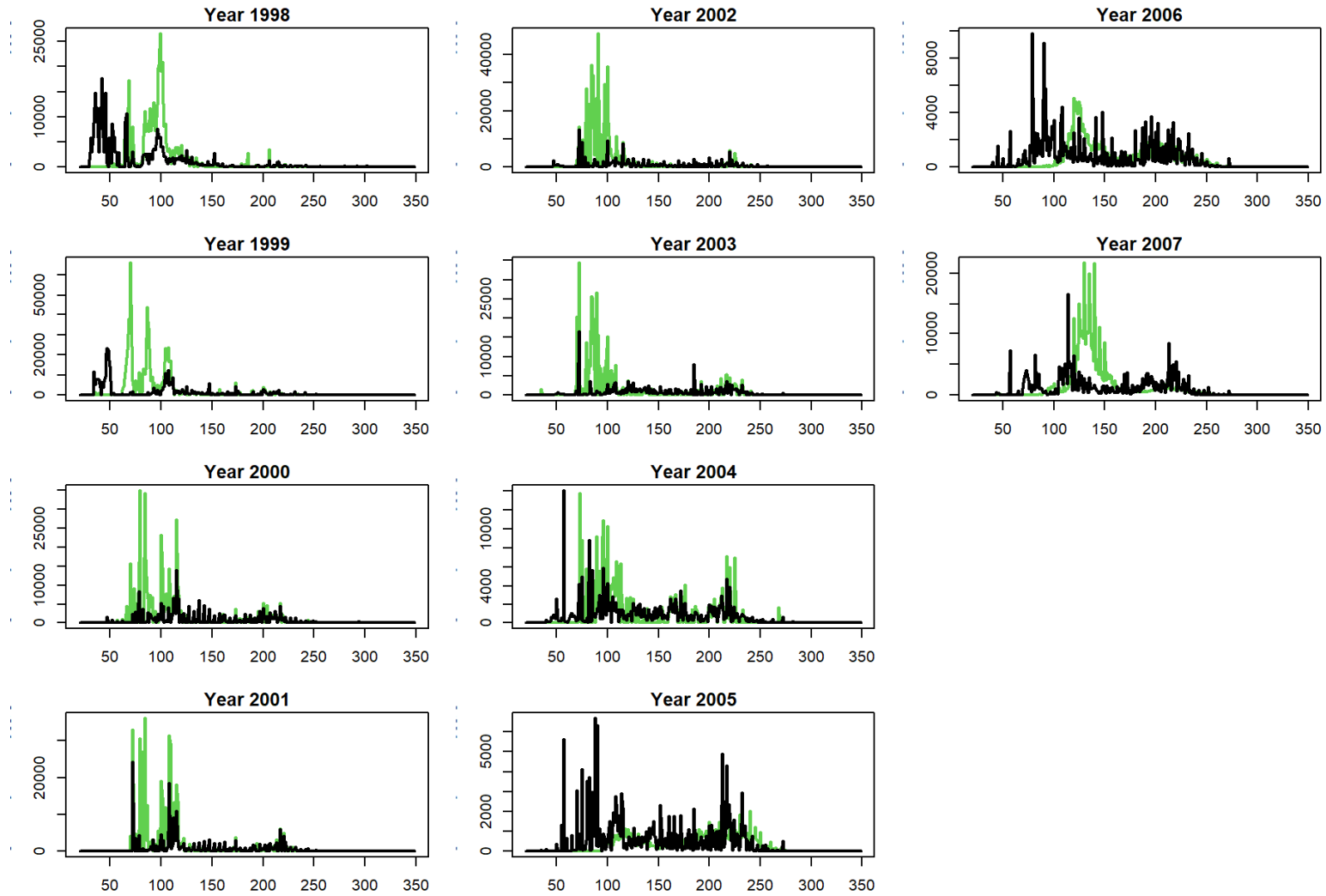


Figure 1. CAS Comparison between the origian CAS at the E-BFT data preparatory meeting (green) and the revised CAS (black) in this document by each inflated catch years.

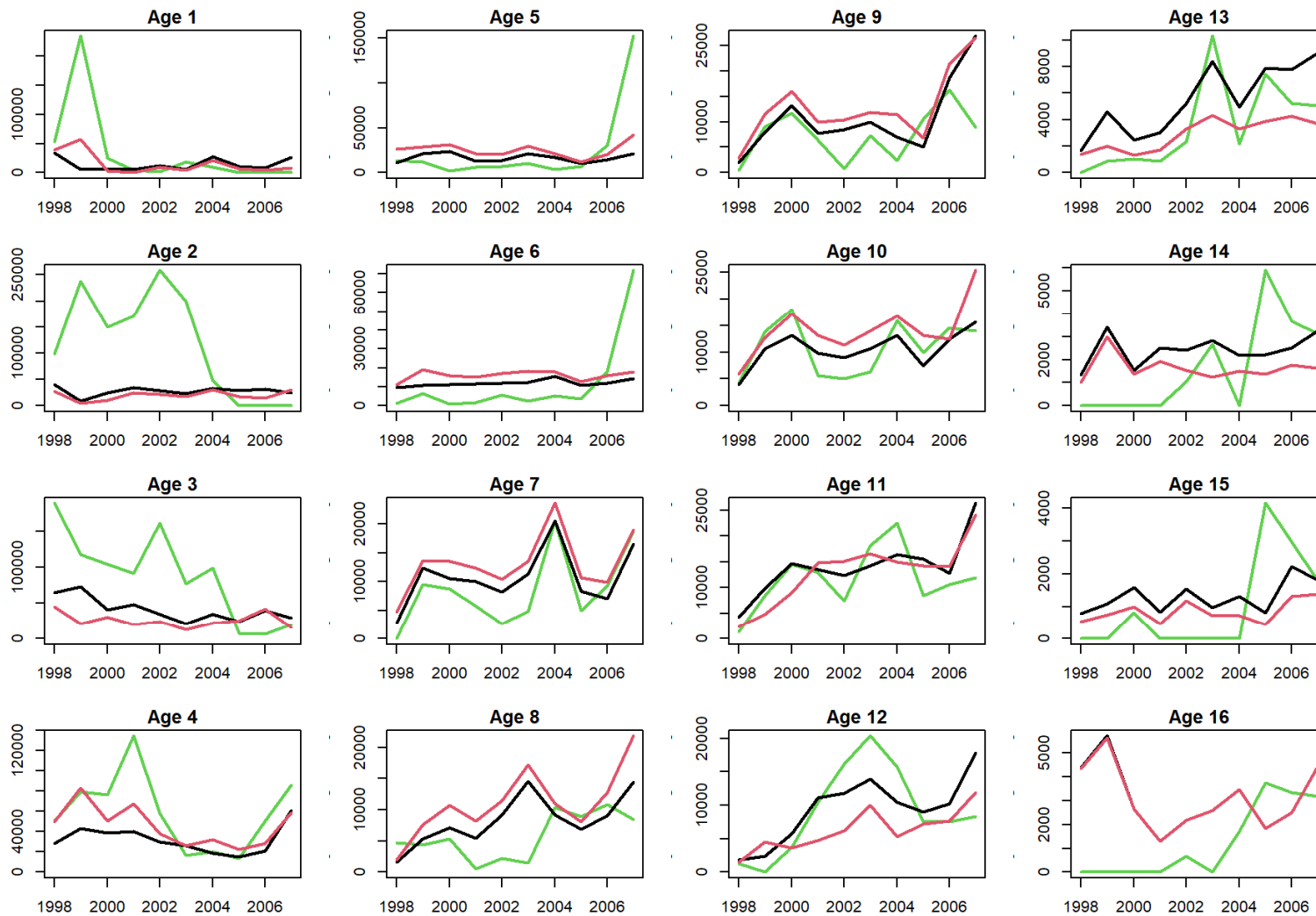


Figure 2. Comparison of CAA estimates of the inflated catch from cohort slicing assuming the von Bertalanffy growth model (black lines) versus the Richards growth assumption (red lines) using the revised CAS. The CAA estimates of the inflated catch from the E-BFT data preparatory meeting is shown in green.

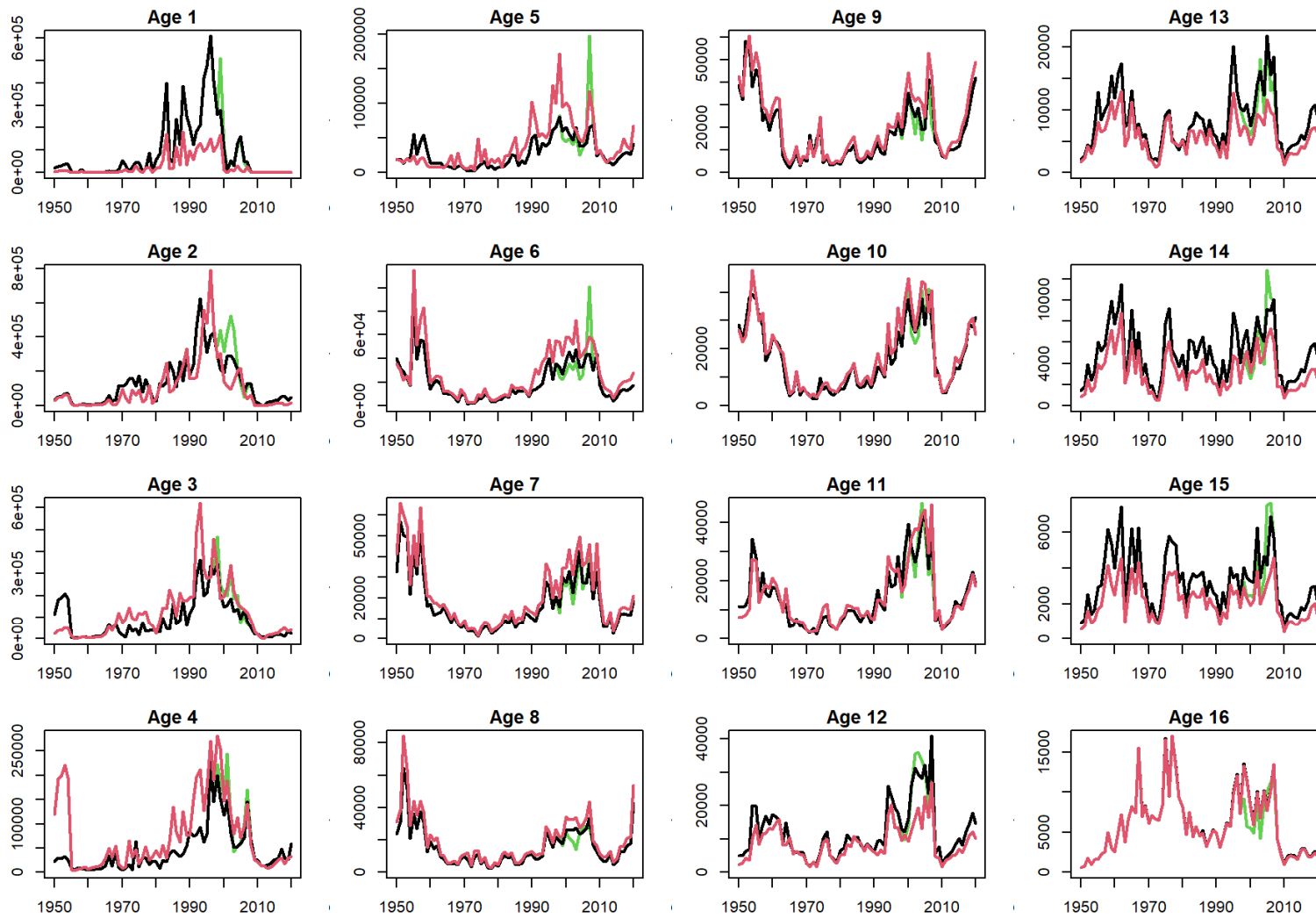


Figure 3. Comparison of total CAA estimates from cohort slicing assuming the von Bertalanffy growth model (black lines) versus the Richards growth assumption (red lines) using the revised CAS. The total CAA estimates from the E-BFT data preparatory meeting is shown in green.